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DUMB DEAD BROTHER

A Series of Fraternally Fractured Short Stories
By Christopher Howard Wolf

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I Hate My Dumb Dead Brother

Before I was born, my parents had another son. A blonde-haired, blue-eyed "angel" - by their words. A kid who was showing early signs of a genius intellect and who excelled at any given sports activity available to him. Granted, this was all before he was ten years old, so I'm not sure of how his above-average adeptness was measured and by what metric.

I only heard the stories second-hand, of course, since I wasn't even conceived until after he died.

At nine years old, the brother I never met was playing hockey with some of his many, many friends - and was winning by a wide margin, I'm sure - when the ice gave out under him. Even though others immediately rushed to the broken patch, with no regard for their own safety, no one saw any sign of him again after he first went under.

My name is Toby, short for Tobias, but that's not really my name.

It's his.

My parents had me to "make up for" the loss of their beloved first-born. This isn't something I've come to realize over the years, this was expressly told to me, directly, throughout my younger years.

Before every notable life event: "Remember to do it like Toby would."

After every predictable failure: "That was not how Toby would've done it."

I wouldn't say my family was abusive, even mentally or emotionally, but I would overhear them referring to me as "Not Toby" in conversations they thought I didn't know about. I could write an entire novella about the various complexes that gave me back then, and to this very day, but this probably isn't the right place for that.

Dad works in finance, I think - I never understood it and just never really cared to learn what he did. Mom is a seamstress, mostly for child beauty pageants. More often than not, I had to serve as the dressmaking dummy until I grew out of size range.

Plenty of complexes.

My parents had a shrine to him. Photos, a lock of hair, his baby shoes, and way too many milestone mementos for someone who spent less than a decade on Earth. There were candles, and they were always kept lit like a fucking eternal flame.

By the time I was 18, my parents and myself, all three of us, had given up the façade and expected little to nothing out of me. I spent my time playing video games and hanging out at the local comic shop. Even though I was escaping into fantasy worlds, I still wasn't the hero in them.

I was sorting through some of my old comics, deciding what to keep and what to sell for more comic-buying money, when I heard the scream.

I thought something terrible had happened, at first. Right below my bedroom window, down on the front lawn, the malevolent and ear-splitting roar of a large truck came to a halt close by. Then, the shriek followed it. I thought someone's pet or their kid had been run over, based on the adult's wild scream of surprise that came after.

As I threw a copy of Mortal Man #1 (embossed variant cover) aside and rushed downstairs, I heard a second scream, just as unbalanced and off-putting as the first. This was when I realized that the first yell had been female, and the second was male, and that they had come from my parents.

I nearly flew out the front door, my feet barely catching each front step as my ankles made attempts to roll themselves and send me face-first onto the concrete landing at the end. I was on auto-pilot and, given my performances as an athlete, it's a minor miracle that I didn't split my lip or forehead. Again.

When I fell to my knees on the grass just beyond, it wasn't an accident - it was from disbelief.

A huge white pick-up truck with extended cab, blacked out windows, and a weird impossible knot icon on the side, had stopped in the middle of the yard, fresh muddy tire grooves trailing behind it. The back of the truck was covered with a blue tarp, several large, identical shapes deforming the surface.

Next to the truck were my mom and dad, also collapsed on the grass out of sheer shock and grasping the pant legs of a man who stood improbably tall over them. He was wearing denim jeans and a black shirt beneath a camo jacket with an unreasonable amount of pockets.

A man with hair as golden as Cap'n Crunch, and eyes as blue as blue Crunchberries.

Immediately, I knew. I don't know how I knew, but I knew that I knew, and I apologize for phrasing it that way.

"T-Toby?" I said under my breath.

Any resentment that had built up in me throughout my life took a backseat to utter bafflement. A dumb dead brother? I could hate that guy. A seemingly magically resurrected Christ figure who existed outside of old photographs and embellished anecdotes? I had to sort out how I felt about that one.

The man, the ultimate man, the real Toby, snapped his attention to me quickly, turning his eyes away from my uncontrollably sobbing parents. His face bunched up into an expression of confusion.

"Wait..." he said with the booming voice of Paul Bunyan, "Who's this?"

"Who?" my Mother asked, her tear-drenched face buried against Toby's left boot.

Dad turned to see what Toby was asking about.

"That doesn't matter", he remarked dismissively, "What's important is that you're home!"

All but kicking mom and dad loose of his jeans, Toby walked over to the spot where I had fallen into an unexpected state of reverent awe. He walked like a soldier. Point A to Point B with efficiency and determination.

"Do I have a God-damned brother?!" he asked in what could've been a gruff exalted cheer or a booming cry of outrage. No way to tell.

"Yeah." I nodded as he reached out a hand and yanked me to my feet like a gorilla grabbing up a cat.

"Any more brothers?"

"Just me."

"Sisters?"

"Just me."

I think I referred to myself as his sister, there, but you have to understand this was a pretty big moment and "thinking clearly" wasn't a habit of mine to begin with.

"Well shit!" Toby cried out, a huge, square-toothed grin on his face.

Before I knew what was happening, he had me in a bear hug with my arms pinned at my sides. He struck my back a few times and I could hear the wind being knocked out of my lungs like the beating of a bass drum. I think I went out-of-body for a moment as I asphyxiated, because I remember looking down and seeing my ragdoll body getting hugged and struck as my sock-clad feet swung back and forth off of the ground.

The cataclysmic freak-out that occurred mere moments earlier was replaced by an eerie silence as the four of us sat at the small wooden table in the kitchen. Sure that Toby must be starving from whatever strange journey had been on for the past 18

years, mom and dad offered him any meal he wanted. He could've asked for any absurd thing, from long pig to dragon haunches, and somehow they would've bent heaven and earth just to serve it to him.

Instead, he just remarked that he wasn't hungry and thanked them for the offer.

I got myself a baloney and ketchup sandwich.

Toby wouldn't say much about where he had been. That, or he couldn't. There were vague mentions of being carried by the frigid water after he fell through the ice, and being "picked up" by a person or group that happened to be down-river. I couldn't work any of it out in my head, but he spoke with enough confidence that no one had a single follow-up question to any of his half-answers.

Finally, after he had clearly reached his breaking point due to all the cooing and hair-stroking from my... from our parents... he clapped the table with his palm and focused on me, again.

"You know what? We should take a drive." He announced.

"To where?" I asked, only now thinking back to the very important comic book organization I had thrown aside.

Toby got up from his chair suddenly, and my parents followed suit as if they were observing traditional etiquette in the court of a King.

"C'mon, let's get outta here." He answered, not answering.

Mom and dad chattered amongst themselves, saying that while the two of us were gone, they'd get Toby's bedroom back in order so that he had a place to stay. It didn't hit me until much later that his room had been my room, and that this meant they were going to frantically shovel everything I owned into a corner of the leaky basement.

I climbed up into Toby's lifted mega-truck like a toddler trying to get onto a Dandyland ride, fumbling and mis-stepping before ultimately grabbing handfuls of seat and pulling with my upper body. Even the seatbelt seemed too big, connecting with a loud metallic "clack" that felt industrial in purpose.

"Where are we going?" I asked, swimming in the expansive passenger's seat as Toby backed the truck up without looking, made a reckless turn in the cul-de-sac, and tore off down the quiet suburban street.

"Burger Load." he answered plainly.

"I thought you weren't hungry?"

"I'm not."

Burger Load, a dank and dingy fast food chain on the edge of town. Mostly, it served truckers and vacationers passing through the rapidly aging intersection between a major highway and a slightly less major highway. I had never eaten there, and I didn't know anyone who had, mostly because no one wanted to get involved with truckers and out-of-towners when there were other local businesses to support.

"There's actually a really nice diner," I mentioned, hoping to guide our path away from that abysmal corporate hole, "It's called Gordy's, and even though there's no drive-thru, they'll rush a to-go order if you're in a hurry."

Toby didn't say anything and kept driving.

"They have pie." I added.

"Burger Load has pies." he replied, furrowing his brow and shaking his head as if I'd said something dumb.

"Burger Load has fruit-flavored syrup in a deep-fried shit-pouch." I snapped back without a second thought.

For the first time since I'd met him, which isn't very impressive since I'd just met him, Toby let out a hearty belly-laugh.

"We're not going for the food."

That confused me for obvious reasons.

"Hey, I never got your name." Toby changed the subject quickly. "What's your name?"

It was my turn to laugh, but it was more of a bitter chuckle.

"Toby."

"No shit?"

"No shit."

"Toby what? Toby Two? Toby Junior?"

"Just Toby. Also 'Toby Junior' would have weird implications."

Toby took both of his hands off the steering wheel, but kept his foot on the gas. He stroked his chin and rubbed his head at the same time.

"Well that's gonna cause some problems." He finally noted.

"Well, mom and dad call me 'Not Toby' from time to time."

In a Eureka moment, Toby snapped his fingers, then placed his hands back on the wheel. Something that brought me great relief.

"Not. I'm gonna call you 'Not' for short."

I didn't like that at all, but speaking up for myself was a skill I'd have to study up on later in life.

A long silence overtook the two of us. I say "silence", but the truck engine sounded like the Indominus Rex going Super Saiyan and holy shit I need to get out of the house more often.

As you would probably expect, of the two of us, Toby was the one to break up the droning din. What he said, though, was anything but expected.

"I ate a demon."

The lack of conversation took over again. I rolled my eyes upward and frowned, trying to figure out what I had just heard, if I had really heard it correctly, and what it meant if I did.

"Here, check this out." Toby eventually said as if he'd made up his mind about something on the spur of the moment.

We pulled over at a patch of undeveloped, wooded property, driving right up the to the tree line. Toby unlatched his belt and hopped out of the truck in one fluid motion as I followed in a slower manner.

It wasn't until we were both standing at the trees, wild brush raking at our shins, that I considered the idea he could've taken me out there to kill me. Images of being told to "look at the birds" while the barrel of a pistol was placed to the back of my head raced through my mind. Would I have to run? How would I outrun this guy, of all people? How far could I get before tripping over my own shoe laces?

I checked Toby for any sign of malicious intent - or any intent at all, really - but instead found the same flat, steely expression on his face that rarely changed.

Then, a gurgling sound came from his stomach, followed by a sick, wet slopping sound in his throat. His cheeks puffed out and it was clear he had just vomited in his mouth.

My eyes went wide and I took a step back.

"Are you oka-"

Suddenly, Toby opened his mouth, a stream of dark redness erupting from his gullet like a lizard's tongue - but a one-way lizard's tongue made of liquid.

I'm not the best with metaphors.

"Holy shit!" I yelled out, "Was that blood? Are you alright?!"

Toby just pointed to the trees.

As I looked over to where he was gesturing, I saw the bloody projectile barf spattered across the trunk of a pine. The wood smoked and sizzled as the blood ate through its bark like acid.

Stupefied, I stared at the tree, then at Toby, who casually wiped his chin with his hand.

"Wha-"

He just repeated his previous statement and headed back to the truck.

"Ate a demon."

I looked around. There was no one for at least a mile, and no cars passing by. Nobody had seen this, other than me. With wobbly legs and few options, I scaled my way back into the truck and buckled in.

As we pulled back onto the road, a resounding thud echoed behind us. I turned back to look as Toby checked his mirror. The tree had been completely eaten through and had fallen across the road.

"We'll get it on the way back." he muttered.

I wasn't interested in the tree.

"So you're never hungry."

"Because I ate a demon."

"Right."

"How? What... what? What demon? When was this? Why?"

Toby let out a tired sigh as if it would just take too much time and energy to explain.

"Not, there are three types of people," He explained, "People who hear stories... people who tell stories... and people who live stories. I'm not type one or two."

By the time we pulled up to the Burger Load parking lot, I was no closer to getting the image of scarlet-tinged, watery vomit out of my head. When Toby hopped out of the truck again, I followed suit yet again like an obedient dog who wanted to go outsies.

I never liked the Burger Load mascot, and I can't imagine why anyone would. A grizzled old prospector, wearing a burger helmet with a head lamp, holding a pick with a fork on one end and a spoon on the other... it honestly just looks like some random mismatched garbage a hack would come up with on the fly because he couldn't think of anything better. The chain's motto, "Hit the Burger Load!" also struck me as generally gross. It didn't remind me of the Gold Rush, it reminded me of taking a shit.

Ding! The bell above the door rang out as we walked in. Seeing the place nearly empty, save for one trucker toward the back, made the place seem oddly imposing, like a greasy liminal space that smelled like stale french fries. It wasn't until I saw the lone guy at the booth that I realized there was only a single commercial truck parked outside.

We stood at the door for what seemed like a minute or two as Toby stared down the trucker, unflinching, stoic, and possibly not even blinking. Completely unaware of our presence, the trucker finished his terrible meal, pulled his bloated form out of the booth, and lumbered over with a tray full of trash.

He let out a belch, almost directly in my face, as he passed us.

"Headed North?" Toby asked the guy as he walked by.

"Yeah, why?" The trucker was in such a post-gorge stupor that he noticed he wasn't alone only when he heard someone speak.

"They're closing off traffic in a bit. Emergency road work. East-west is closed off, too, downed power lines, and there's a tree or something across the road to the south. You'll be fine, though, if you hurry out."

The trucker picked up his pace and pushed through the double-doors.

"Sounds like the fuckin' end o' days." he grumbled.

Understanding that the tree thing wasn't a random event brought me no closer to understanding the rest of what was happening. Moments after the trucker left, Toby reached down and locked the doors. He then looked back toward the restaurant floor, as if scoping the place out for anything he might've missed.

"What's actually going on, here?" I asked.

"Shh." Toby held his fist in the air, as if signaling to fellow soldier to halt.

"Are you a soldier?" I asked, just as loud.

"Quiet." he quietly snapped back.

Toby marched methodically to the counter, where a girl with stringy black hair and a wide frown stood waiting at a register. Her uniform, a cursed brown and pea-green set of slacks, polo shirt, and ball cap, seemed crusty and worn. As she spoke, however, what was most present in my mind was that it looked like she could've probably fit her fist in her mouth.

"Welcome! You've hit the Burger Load! How can I service you?" she croaked.

"What do you want, Not?" Toby turned to me, and all at once I felt like a little kid being put on the spot in front of the adults.

"Uh..."

I looked up at the smeared and finger-printed board above the counter. I wasn't any more hungry than Toby was, though my stomach was full of baloney and bread, not the corpse of an unknowable eldritch horror. One thing did look good to me, though, something I hadn't had anywhere in a very long time.

"I guess I could have a strawberry milkshake."

A small, sly smirk played on the cashier's face.

"Shake machine's broken."

My shoulders dropped and, for some reason, I was legitimately disappointed even though I hadn't intended to even be there that day.

"Aw, that's... damn. So you don't have any shakes at all?" I asked in a defeated tone that even I could hear.

The girl's eyes rolled back a bit and her trembling smirk squirmed its way into a smile.

I looked to the rest of the kitchen workers, some in the back, one at the drive-thru window, and another standing at a second register. They were all ladies around the same age as the one we had been talking to, all the dark and brooding trailer trash type. For whatever reason, each one of them seemed to go a bit slack with some sort of perverse pleasure at hearing what I had said.

"Get him a Minor Meal." Toby barked.

He seemed angry at the girl, and I wanted to believe it was in some way a form of defending me. However, the fact he had ordered me a children's item didn't match up with that premise. Especially since I'm pretty sure he called it a "Minor" Meal when the trademarked term is "Miner" Meal.

I can't explain it, but it felt that way.

We sat down at the same booth the trucker had been in, and even after all that, his ass indentation was still in my seat.

"What'd you get?" Toby asked as I pulled open the Miner Meal box.

"What do you mean? You ordered for me." I said in a snarky way, making sure he knew I was at least mildly pissed about it.

"Let's look it over."

"I... alright."

I unpacked the box.

A flat cheeseburger, a tiny carton of fries, and a plastic baggie with a toy inside.

"What's on the cheeseburger?" Toby further pried.

Groaning and shaking my head with annoyance, I unwrapped the burger, pulled off the bun, and showed it to him with a flippantly disrespectful flourish. Torn and stale bun. Single burger patty. One dot of ketchup, one dot of mustard, a single half-pickle-slice, and, to top it all off, no cheese.

"Right, that lines up." Toby nodded, "The fries?"

I dumped them out on the try. I had gone from irate to curious at that point. What exactly was this all about, if the purpose wasn't just to mock me?

The fry carton was under-filled despite already being a small. A few of the fries were brown, a few were green, and there was an onion ring in the bottom.

"God, I hate onion rings!" I scoffed.

"You're crazy, then." Toby noted.

"Like you fuckin' know, devil-eater."

"Funny. What's the toy?"

I didn't want to admit it, but I was kinda jazzed to see what the toy was. By now it should come as no surprise to you that I am a man-child. Less than a year beforehand, I had bought the entire line-up of Zombionix toys on eBay because there was no Chick-N-Beef location within driving distance and I "had to" have the complete collection.

My breath was heavy as I opened the plastic containing the toy item. Not because I was hoping for something cool, which I was, but because Toby had made this whole process seem deathly important.

"Wow..."

I held the miniature action figure in my palm and studied it - a poorly-sculpted little man with tiny legs, fat arms, and a crooked face. He was giving a thumbs-up with each hand and wore sunglasses.

"... I actually have no idea who this is."

Toby leaned back in his chair and pulled a gun from somewhere I didn't see.

"Right." He said in a cold, morbid tone.

"Whoa!" I jumped up in my seat and held my hands out at him, "I'm not that bothered by it. I'm not! It's fine! In fact, this food looks great and I love the toy! No one has to die!"

If I could've shit myself in fear, I would have, but in that moment I think my asshole disappeared into itself.

"Calm the fuck down." Toby growled.

"See, if you just said to calm down, maybe that'd work," I stammered, "b-but then you threw 'the fuck' in there and that concerns me."

Toby placed the gun on the table and, after a quick glance to see if it had been noticed by the staff, he leaned in and spoke quietly.

"Not. Have you ever heard of The CRP Institute?"

"No."

"A Daestitus?"

"No."

Toby frowned and, breathing in through his nose in the most "I don't have time for this" way anyone has ever inhaled, he gave in and did a sliver of story-telling.

"The CRP Institute is an organization that deals with anomalous objects and entities."

"Oh, like the-"

"Yes, like all the ones you have heard of. When I went through the ice that day, nearly two decades ago... I wasn't rescued right away. I washed down river, got snagged on an old submerged shopping cart, and I stayed down there for about a week."

"Under the water?"

"Under the ice and the water. I wouldn't call what I did 'screaming' because there was no air in my lungs, but I was there for a Hell of a long time. Unable to die no matter how much I wanted to. Hell of a thing, wanting to die at nine."

Toby picked the gun up again and clicked what I assume to be the safety.

"When some ice fishermen found me down there, they called 911. The people who showed up weren't cops or EMS."

I sat back down and covered my mouth out of shock at the revelation.

"It was the PCP Institute." I said in a barely audible whisper.

"The CRP Institute. Yeah." Toby corrected me. "I've been like... the property of a bunch of weird nerdy science goofs for all this time. They've tested me, run me through trials. Can't die. Good at everything. Never lose, even games of pure chance. They call me CRP-7422, the Golden Boy. Pretty quickly, they needed me so much that I was starting to write my own rules. Bed time, dessert before dinner, all dessert and no dinner."

"Sounds like a kid's dream."

"Yeah. I feel like I got suckered into it, though. I've been doing... I guess you'd call them 'missions' for them. Getting to do what I want, having adventures to distract me, I

started to forget I had a past life... that I had family. When I got called out here, it all came flooding back and I took an unapproved detour back home."

"I don't know what to say." I said.

Toby popped out of the booth and started walking back to the counter at a steady clip. I barely had time to follow.

"Don't say anything at all. Just help me kill this thing."

Hearing those words, I instead strongly considered unlocking the front doors and running as far as possible.

"Did you enjoy your meal?" the grim little dirtball at the register asked, sounding incredibly sarcastic.

"No. It was awful." Toby shouted, pointing the gun directly in the girl's face.

Instead of being shaken or reacting with any sort of fear, the cashier rolled her eyes back again, smiled, and quivered at his words.

"Daestitus." Toby turned to look back at me, "Disappointment Demon."

He said this as if I would know what the fuck.

With one sweep of his arm, Toby grabbed the girl by her neck, lifted her in the air, slid her across the counter with an audible squeak, and threw her into the dining area, where her small body toppled a series of chairs like a bowling ball before log-rolling under a table.

I watched her spin off into the distance, then looked back to see Toby already hopping the counter.

"Demon-fuckers!" he shouted in a blind rage.

Two employees moved to stop him in a pincer formation, one at each side. They grabbed his arms to restrain him, but two diminutive emo girls weren't much of a match for life-size G.I. Joe. Just as soon as they grabbed onto him, he swung his arms together, bashing their heads together. All the while, the employees never lost their blank, blissful expressions.

As they crumpled to the floor, I watched, paralyzed with dread and horror as he put a bullet in each of them.

The sound of the gunshots hurt my ears despite the fact I was standing a good several feet away.

More shots rang out as Toby went into the back. I could only see the top of his head over the equipment at times as I heard clattering, crashing, the wet crackling sound of bones breaking, punctuated only by the occasional gunshot and Toby screaming "Demon-Fuckers!" at the top of his voice.

It went on forever, like when, for whatever reason, an injured animal keeps hanging on to life despite the fact its unforgiving, unceremonious death is a foregone conclusion. Fighting. Clattering. Fighting. Smashing. Fighting. I had covered my ears and found myself wishing for everyone working there to die already, just so the spectacle would be over.

When I couldn't hear the bangs through my hands, I pulled them away from my ears and waited.

Everything was eerily silent at that point, other than the beeping of a timer on a deep fryer.

"C'mon." I heard Toby's voice next to me and nearly jumped out of my skin.

Turning to see him there, I noticed a healthy amount of what looked like black oil spattered all over his clothes.

"What's all over you?"

"Thrall goop."

"What?"

"I'm not explaining two things in one day. C'mon."

Toby lead me behind the counter, his hand on my shoulder as he almost pushed me forward with each shaking, uneasy step. We passed the first girls he had shot, black liquid pooling around the bullet holes in their heads. I know it's not my imagination - they were still smirking.

To say the other girls were brutally massacred would not do justice to the level of deranged carnage that laid before me. Limbs gone. Innards spilled. Bones protruding. There's probably some sort of poetic justice in turning a fast food restaurant into a slaughterhouse, but I'm still too sick over the sight to make light of it.

We walked past motionless body after motionless body, including one draped over the beeping deep fryer, her head sizzling in the oil.

"I probably should've told you not to look at them." Toby realized.

We stopped at the freezer.

"What's in there?" I asked, already seeing where this was going, "Or do I not want to know? No... I want to know what's in there."

"Easy answer? The demon. Once they're on our plane of existence, they seek out cold. It's like finally putting a salve on a third degree burn you've had since the dawn of time."

Toby pulled open the freezer door as a frosty cloud of mist spilled out.

"Hey!" Toby shouted, "You fuckin' get outta there, ya lil shit."

No response.

The lights flickered, then died, leaving us in a pitch darkness.

"Yeah, real melodramatic." Toby sneered, unimpressed with the theatrics.

Personally, I was about to burst into tears.

A single light came to life within the freezer, nearly blinding us before our eyes adjusted. A secondary, red light, for emergency lighting, I suppose, gave us a barely-visible glimpse of what was inside.

Sitting in the center of the freezer, on a throne of burger patty boxes, was a grizzled old miner in a burger helmet with a head lamp - one that was now shining directly on us.

"Son of a bitch..." my fear was replaced with a sort of slowly growing sense of madness, "It's Picky Pete, the Burger Load Prospector!"

A slow growl, inhuman in nature and undefined in location, echoed around us.

"You've... hit the Burger Load..." it rumbled.

Picky Pete looked emaciated. Desiccated. Worm-eaten and dried out, like a cadaver trapped in a cave-in for countless years. It sat motionless in its place of high importance, tattered overalls rippling ever-so-slightly with the freezer's cooling breeze.

Toby still had his hand on my shoulder. His grip firmed as he no doubt knew I was about to flee from this encounter entirely.

"Dig... these... prices..." the voice rumbled again, "Unearth... savings..."

"Wait, so the demon is impersonating a fast food mascot? Or... was the mascot always a demon? I don't get it." I was no closer to regaining my sanity, but some gnawing questions were bubbling to the surface.

"A Daestitus feeds on heartbreak, sadness, woe... negative, depressive emotions." Toby seemed unfazed by the creature, "A place like this is perfect for that. It's not the real Picky Pete - It just came here like a spider moving into an abandoned web."

"So it's basically just a parasite?" I felt my heartbeat stabilizing, and the bile in my gut was starting to settle down.

"Exactly."

"Well, I'm not gonna lie..."

I started the sentence, and halfway through, I saw Toby turn to me, his expression dropping from self-assured to pure concern.

"... that's incredibly disappointing."

Laughter rumbled through the building as darkness fell once again, and when the red emergency light returned, Picky Pete was standing directly in front of us.

"Ask about... joining... the Burger Load... family... today..."

It seized Toby and me by our throats, and all at once I could feel my windpipe closing. Struggle as I might, all I could do was frantically claw pieces of musty, dead flesh from Picky Pete's forearms with my fingernails.

"I can't believe you fed him!" Toby managed to get the words out as he choked.

"Kill it." I gasped, "Kill it."

Toby unloaded countless bullets into Picky Pete's stomach and chest, but to no effect.

"Opposite." Toby wheezed. I knew he couldn't be killed, but I sure fucking could.

"Wha-" I choked.

"Opposite of disappointed... proud." Toby did his best to snap Picky Pete's fingers, but each break re-set itself as the demon mascot laughed its ass off. "Say you're proud... proud to have... me for brother!"

"I'm-" I coughed and gagged, "Proud you're my brother!"

There was no sound other than the two of us losing air and starting to black out.

Even Picky Pete was dead quiet as he looked to me, then to Toby.

"You... not really... proud?!" The hurt in Toby's voice was audible, even if his voice itself was strained and stifled.

"Oh, wow. Damn..." Picky Pete boomed.

All I could do with my final moments of life was shrug.

I could feel the cold climb up my limbs, all the way to my head, as I passed out and everything went black.

...

My eyes opened. I could see light.

They closed again.

My eyes opened. I could see a pair of old mining boots.

They closed again.

My eyes opened. I could see Toby leaning over me, slapping me across the face. I couldn't feel, though. I just saw his hand approaching repeatedly, followed by the room seeming to shake after each blow.

Sound started to filter back through my ears. First, a ringing, then the dull hum of the freezer, then the distorted sound of Toby's voice.

"Not. Not. Get the fuck up. I don't lose my men. Ever."

I sat up, shivering and numb - either from my surroundings or from regaining consciousness in waves.

Toby seemed relieved as he stood over me, wiping red drool from his mouth and chin. I turned my head slightly to see Picky Pete lying on the icy floor, his head obliterated and slowly melting in a splatter of demon-blood spew. In my hazy state of mind, the demon's skull reminded me of a serving of cherry-flavored shaved ice that had been dropped on a hot sidewalk.

Toby helped me to my feet for the second time that day.

I should've been thankful, but I wasn't.

The first thing I said after coming back from the brink of death was...

"You could've done that at any time."

"Yeah." Toby said flatly. Putting his hands on his hips as he looked down at the dead being.

"Why didn't you do that sooner? Hell, why didn't you do that to start off with? What was up with that shit about being proud of you?!"

For a solid minute, it seemed Toby had no answers to give. Then he spoke just as flatly as ever.

"Deep-seated need for validation from others."

"Did you bring me here just so I'd be impressed?"

"Yeah."

I guess I'm not the only one who ended up with a complex or two.

"What now?" I kicked Picky Pete's boot, just to be sure.

"Wanna eat him?" Toby asked very directly.

"What? No. God, no."

"Lot of good reasons to. Always full. Acid spit. I guess there's not a lot, but there's two reasons and they're good ones."

"Dude I already said no."

"Yeah, not everyone has the stomach for it."

Back outside, the world seemed like it had been put on pause while we were gone. There was no traffic due to the closed roads, and in looking around the empty parking lot, I realized that there had never been any cars for the employees to get to and from work. Things were eerily peaceful, especially in comparison to what I had just witnessed.

Toby marched his way to his truck and pulled the tarp off of the back. Very few things would've surprised me in that moment, and the explosive barrels weren't one of them. I watched him roll the barrels into the restaurant, one after the other after the other. At no point did I offer to help, out of both self-preservation and resentment in equal measure.

"Time to get out of range and light it up." Toby held a remote detonation device in his hand as he got back into the driver's seat.

I thought for a moment, then drew in a sharp breath and pointed at him.

"Wait!"

I ran into the building, the building that was now housing rather a lot of explosives.

When I came back out the double doors, I was dragging along the cashier. The one Toby had throttled and thrown under a table. She was dead weight, but she was breathing. I dragged her by the leg, trailing her hat and nametag behind her on the pavement.

"Fuck no." Toby yelled from the driver's side window as I approached. "You can't bring one home. It's not a Minor Meal toy. What the fuck is wrong with you?"

"She's alive." I insisted.

"It's not even real."

"Well whatever she is, real or not, she's breathing and her heart is beating."

"Its heart is beating thrall goop."

"So, what? You want me to throw her back in to get blown up?"

"Very obviously yes."

I hefted the girl into the bed of the pickup and rolled her in until she was face-down in a slick of what must've been very flammable liquids. While Toby didn't like the idea, he didn't intervene as I closed the back of the truck and came around to the passenger's seat.

"Don't trust it. Get rid of it when it wakes up."

He didn't look at me as we drove off.

"I'm not keeping her, man. That's a really weird thing to say. I just didn't think it was right."

"Whatever."

A moment passed before he spoke up again.

"Don't fuck it."

"JESUS CHRIST, Dude."

Toby took one hand off the wheel, pulled the detonator out of his cup holder, and pressed the button.

When we pulled into the neighborhood, Toby began to drive slowly. This was unusual for him.

We passed by an Inter-Ship delivery truck. Then another. And so on. As we slow-rolled the block, it seemed as if most every resident had a delivery from an Inter-Ship truck at that very moment. Most were parked in driveways. Some were on the side of the road. If I hadn't noticed Toby giving each single one the stink-eye, I probably would've looked right past the ridiculous amount of delivery trucks.

As if he knew what I was going to ask, Toby spoke up.

"The CRP."

He pulled into a fenced-in yard and kept the truck idling.

"Get in the back and pull the tarp over you."

I did as I was told immediately. If there was one thing I had learned thus far, it was that I was 100% not ready to handle anything he handled on a regular basis.

In the back of the truck, under the tarp, I took a second look at the cashier. Luckily, she was still out like a light, but her eyelids were fluttering, so it probably wasn't going to be long before she woke up and screeched and ran away or whatever thralls do. I could see now that her eyes were blank, soulless orbs. The teeth hidden behind black-stained lips were razor-sharp points. All of them. For some reason, I didn't feel any more safe under that tarp than outside of it.

The truck rolled to a stop. I have no idea where.

"Golden Boy!" I heard an unfamiliar voice, garbled like it was being filtered through a voice-changer.

"What're you guys doing here?"

"Bad boy. Thought we could trust you. Many years. Going rogue? Off the grid?"

"I visited my parents."

"Off the grid. Rogue."

"Agree to disagree, I guess. Are you cleaning them?"

My heart raced. Cleaning them? My parents? What did that mean? Killing them?

"Have to. No choice. No memory. Your fault entirely."

"Fuck off."

"Incorrect. You fuck off."

"Bitch, I will come out of this truck and put a piece of you in every garbage can at the end of every driveway in front of every house in this idyllic little community."

"Violent threat. Lost your cool. I win the debate."

"Fucking fine."

I relaxed a bit. Cleaning their memories... that was at least not as extreme or final.

Toby drove off again... and again, we came to a stop.

"C'mon out."

I slowly lifted the tarp and slid up over the side of the truck bed, falling onto the ground on my back. Toby had driven up beside my house, in a spot concealed by fences and trees.

"Go home. Mom and dad won't remember anything that happened in the past 24 to 72 hours."

"That's kind of a big window."

Dusting myself off, I stood there in the yard with Toby. He didn't seem happy, mad, sad - he didn't seem affected by anything in any way.

"So they won't remember you?" I asked, thinking that must bother him in at least some way, but not having enough tact to approach it differently.

"I figured as much when I came here. I knew what I was getting into. Well, except for having a brother, I guess."

"I'll still remember you, right?"

"Yeah. The CRP doesn't know who you are."

"I guess it's good I never amounted to anything." I laughed.

Toby nodded, unironically agreeing with the statement. He then gestured to the truck bed.

"Get that piece of shit out of my truck."

He hopped back behind the wheel as I rolled the cashier onto the ground with a heavy thud.

"Since you're keeping your memory," he called out as he made a wide turn, eating up the grass again, "You'll remember not to fuck it, right?"

As Toby peeled out and drove away, I flipped him off.

But yeah, later that evening she woke up, screeched, and ran away.

No one remembers Toby showing back up. My parents don't remember seeing him, the neighbors don't remember him revving his engine, he essentially went back to being deceased as far as anyone other than me is concerned.

My parents aren't sure why my bedroom is full of Toby's things, again, all meticulously placed just as he left them 18 years ago. They don't know who tore up the lawn, and they're confused about where exactly the past few days went. I told them they're just getting old and probably have early-onset dementia.

When I think back to Toby's visit, I no longer hate my dumb dead brother. I dislike my dumb living brother. I guess that's probably how most people feel about their siblings, anyway.

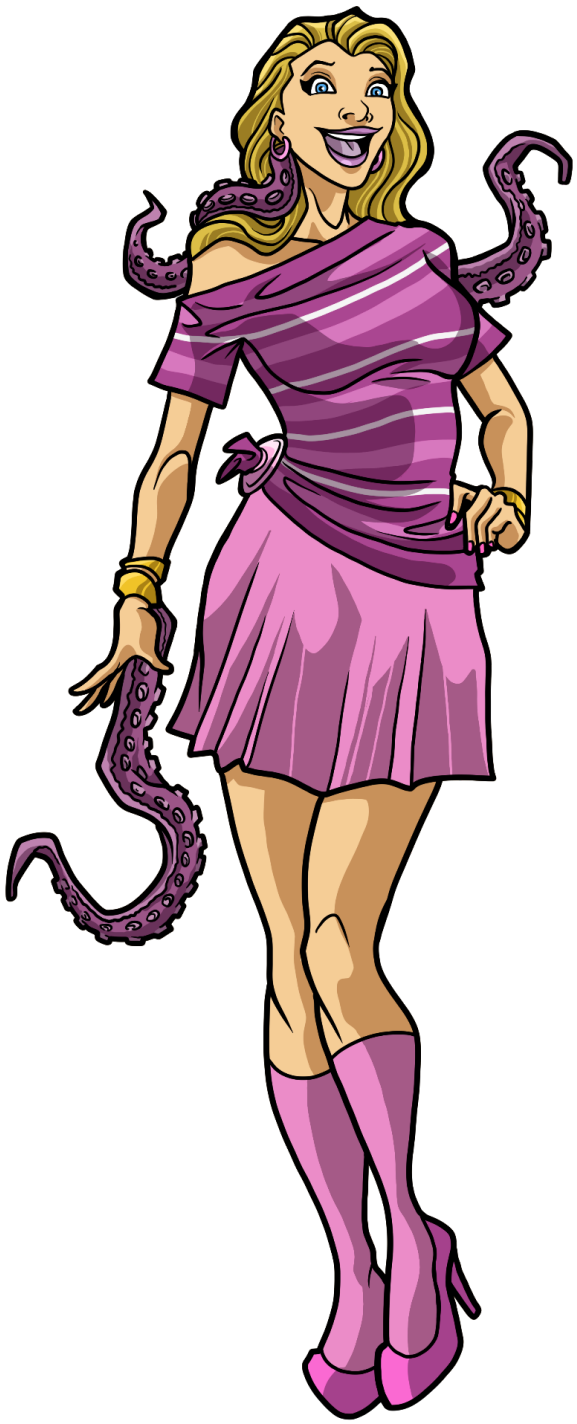
This is pretty much all I have to say about everything that happened on that day.

Don't hold out for a "part 2".

There are three types of people. Those who hear stories, those who write them, and those who live them.

I think I'm gonna try being the third one, now.

I Hate My Dumb Dead Brother Again



Okay, so I don't think I'm cut out for a life of adventure.

Long story short, my older brother died in a freak accident before I was born. I made a half-assed attempt at living up to his standard for a few years before settling into a life of teenage mediocrity. This isn't turning out as short as I thought it would be, so I'll go quicker - he wasn't dead.

There we go. Easy.

I've been putting out plates of food for the thrall that I essentially kidnapped from the demon-infested burger joint before it was blown up. (Man, that recap was shit. I have to remember to go back and change it.)

I don't know if she's eating what I put out or if a possum is getting it, but either way I'm helping out a feral creature that smells like death. I guess it's a nice gesture however you look at it. Finding the bowl flipped over in the dirt every morning seems to say "possum".

I was actually right about to put down a dog dish full of pizza rolls when I was interrupted. (Don't read into it. The dog dish wasn't being used, and I knew mom would notice if any bowls or plates were missing.)

The interruption came in the form of a truck engine that was completely unmistakable in tone and amplitude. The not-so-subtle rumble of a truck that told you to fuck off just by looking at it, and called you a bitch when you did.

"Toby?" I asked the complete lack of people around me.

It had been a couple weeks since he had left in what seemed like a pretty well wrapped-up ending to a story that didn't need a sequel. I was just as surprised as any of you might be right now.

The bellowing horn confirmed it. Thoughtless and impatient, it was him.

"Hey! Not." He called from the driver's side window as I emerged from the back yard and rounded the house.

I did a hurried walk to the side of the road and gestured for Toby to keep his voice down.

"What the Hell are you doing? You aren't supposed to be here. Mom and Dad think you're dead, and the OPP Syndicate doesn't know I exist."

"The CRP Institute," he corrected me, "And why are you telling ME that? I was the one who told YOU that."

I gestured to the idling super-truck that sounded like any normal truck would while gunning its engine.

"Because it looks like you might've forgotten."

His response was simple and good-natured in tone, but it still made my blood run cold.

"Get in."

I backed away.

"Ha! Fat chance. Last time I went anywhere with you... the ONLY time I went anywhere with you... well, yeah, you were there."

Toby leaned back in his seat and shook his head as if I were imposing on him and wasting his time.

"C'mon. It's not a mission."

"I don't believe you, dude."

"Here, look."

Toby held a small slip of paper out of the window and, like an emu being fed by a tourist, I quizzically approached the vehicle and snatched the slip from his hand.

I read the bland typewriter text out loud.

"This voucher entitles CRP-7422 to one (1) visitor. Redeemable only at CRP Institute subsite ██-█, permitting visitor level ████ ████ access ONLY. This voucher may not be traded with other CRP personnel, entities, or objects."

I just said "blank" for all the blacked-out text.

"What, is it Bring-Your-Estranged-Mystery-Brother-To-Work-Day?" I asked, very skeptically.

Toby just stared at me blankly for a moment.

"Get in the fucking truck, Not."

I admit I wanted to learn things no one should learn... in a safe, controlled, and sterile environment, at least. To be honest, in recent times, things around town had hit their peak – when it came to being completely boring and monotonous. My personal malaise had gotten so overwhelming that it seemed like the days and even weeks were blurring together in a flavorless stew of mystery meats.

I could still smell the vague scent of a demon corpse, acid-burned to death by puke, that was, in and of itself, the remains of another demon - but nonetheless, in the fucking truck I did get.

God damn I fucked up that recap.

Our destination was much less sinister and imposing than I had imagined. Granted, I only had about an hour and a half to imagine it during the drive. I pictured a malformed, archaic stone tower with the letters "CRP" written in stern block lettering near the top. Lightning cracking in the background, barbed wire fences surrounding it.

As we rolled to a stop in front of the "Wacky Taxes" storefront located in an otherwise abandoned and run-down strip mall, I was convinced Toby had just remembered he needed some last-minute tax assistance. There wasn't a customer in sight, and the nearby bus stop was clearly never used, having been taken over by a bag lady sleeping under a few sheets of cardboard.

"Wait here." Toby mumbled as he went inside.

I stretched my legs in the cracked and worn parking lot, taking note of the dandelions that were pushing up through the pavement. It was nice to be out of that passenger's seat, and it was nice to hear the sound of wind and crows instead of the same AC/DC album Toby had blasted the entire way there.

There were so many questions I wanted to ask him about events past, present, and future, but no - time for the 100th refrain of "Big Balls" as he drummed the steering wheel.

"Oh, hello."

A voice shook me out of my relieved stupor.

The bag lady had crept up on me. A demented-looking woman with a crooked grin full of crooked teeth, and scary-blue eyes that looked almost alien at first.

"Hey." I replied, my voice trembling from the surprise, even through a single word.

"Spare change?" the girl asked, a manic sort of smile on her face. She was younger than I would've expected despite the wild gray hair, someone who was probably on hard times due to drugs, rather than age.

"Uh, sure..." I fumbled in my pockets. I don't know why I said I had change when I didn't.

After a moment of what I knew would be a fruitless search, I pulled out my wallet. The smallest bill I had was a ten, because the only bill I had was a ten.

"Here you go." I handed the cash over. Let's be real, my Dad was the one who had earned it, anyway.

The bag girl took the bill in her oddly slender fingers and folded it over a few times before poking it down her tattered, rumpled shirt.

"Altruist or realist?" she asked, like a check-out girl asking if I wanted paper or plastic bags.

"I'm sorry, I don't know what you're saying."

"Altruist or realist? Saving my life, or protecting yours?"

I searched for the meaning of her question in those odd, bulbous eyes, the blue inside of them sent a winter chill down my spine. For whatever dumb reason, I felt like I had to play the hero and claim altruism when in actuality I had just been too socially awkward to tell her to leave me alone from the start.

Before I could answer, Toby pushed the Wacky Taxes door open and gestured for me to come over. When I looked back at the girl, she was already back to fussing over and rearranging the trash in her bus stop abode.

The inside of the building was exactly as depressing as the outside. Just a gray carpet, several pressed board desks, and old office chairs on plastic wheels that clearly wouldn't roll on carpet.

A single employee was sitting at the front-right desk, wearing a dress shirt and black tie. His balding head seemed to be missing the exact amount of hair in his wild mustache. He had a dour expression and barely regarded me and Toby as we walked past.

"Wait... You said this wasn't a mission. This is another dark nest of overwhelming despair and depression! Is that a thrall?" I whispered to Toby, turning back to look at the motionless man and the desk.

"What?" Toby looked back as well, then to me, "No, that's Harold. He's a nice guy."

"Oh. Sorry."

"Don't apologize to me, I'm not Harold."

Toby lead me back through a hallway, then an office, then to an employee bathroom.

"Alright, this is an elevator to the CRP subsite lobby. Walk in, flush the toilet, and say your full name so the clearance sensors pick it up."

I did as I was told, pushing open the thin wooden door as it creaked on its hinges. The light switch next to the door felt grimy as I flipped it on, revealing a hellish standing coffin of foam green and off-white tiles. The sink had no mirror, and the toilet had no lid.

I approached the toilet and, standing to the side of it, pressed the handle down.

"Tobias Maxwell Fingerman!" I mumbled, looking around warily.

"Louder." Toby called from outside the door.

I sighed, searching the surroundings for a microphone or camera. Two things that should never be in a bathroom under any other circumstances.

Flush.

"TOBIAS MAXWELL FINGERMAN!"

Flush.

"TOBIAS MAXWELL FINGERMAN!"

On the fourth flush, Toby couldn't hold it in anymore. All at once he burst into laughter so loud and raucous that it rattled the door.

The real elevator turned out to just be a normal one at the end of the hallway outside the office. It wasn't hidden at all.

"If you want to keep popping in and out of my life like this, you're gonna have to be less of a douche bag. I get enough bullshit at home."

My statement hung in the air as we descended in the elevator, light jazz accompanying my stern ultimatum.

"Brothers give each other shit." Toby said with an incredulous side-eye, "That's how it works."

"You have a brother for a couple weeks and now you're an expert, huh?"

"I spent a lot longer than that thinking about what it'd be like to have one."

The jazz took over as the conversation, then the elevator, came to an abrupt halt.

I'm not gonna lie, everything about this place was the definition of underwhelming. I had pictured a sprawling complex hidden beneath the earth. Vaulted ceilings, an endless expanse of work stations. Men in black suits walking this way and that, perp-walking strange creatures and toting glowing briefcases.

Instead, I was met with claustrophobic cement walls and the drudgery of any given industrial workplace. From the elevator, we entered a bland, poorly-lit hall that ended in a large metal door beside a glass-top security desk with a bunch of posters of various women pinned to the wall behind it.

The door had an emblem on it, reading "CRP" in large letters, "INSTITUTE" in smaller letters beneath that, and "CAPTURE, RESTRAIN, PROVOKE" in even smaller letters at the bottom.

The guy from the tax office sat at the security desk with the same frumpy look as above, his dress shirt and tie now accompanied by a black cap on his head that read "SECURITY".

"Yikes - what the Hell?" I asked as we approached the desk, "So there's more than one of him, and they look similar, but he's not a thrall?"

"Stop calling Harold a thrall." Toby snapped, "He's a CRP. Like me. CRP-9889, the Everyman. Think of it like, if this was a movie, he's all the background characters."

"How is that possible?"

"I'm not a scientist."

I figured they were twins and Toby was fucking with me, again.

"Harold! What's up? Anything new in the past five minutes?" Toby asked, shaking the man's hand vigorously. Though the guy... Harold, I guess... shook my brother's hand in turn, his glossed-over, bored expression never changed, and he didn't answer.

"This is a friend of mine." Toby said, giving me a shit-eating smirk and an obvious wink. It wasn't necessary, there was no way in Hell I was about to tell anyone there anything about myself. Letting on that I was just some random teenager with no business being anywhere near this place would be a one-way trip to a memory wipe.

When Harold reached the same meaty, hairy hand out to me, I instinctively went to shake hands with him as well. It was awkward when I realized he was reaching out because he wanted me to give him something. He left me hanging.

"The voucher." Toby reminded me.

"Oh, right!"

I pulled out my wallet and fumbled with it a bit while Toby made small-talk.

"I have a ton of vouchers piled up. Favor after favor. I've got YEARS worth. Finally decided to start using 'em."

Toby seemed like the kind of guy who enjoyed one-way chats where he got to talk uninterrupted. So much so that he didn't notice the panicked sweat absolutely dumping out of my pores.

"It's not here."

I slowly looked up to Toby, who had gone silent in an instant. When he spoke, his voice was intensely serious in tone. It was like he had gone from prankster to soldier in a split-second.

"What's not there? The voucher?"

I reached into my wallet with two fingers and pulled out the ten dollar bill, the reason for this discovery going completely over my head as I focused entirely on the missing slip of paper.

"Who'd you give it to?" he demanded, as if I were stupid enough to just hand it to someone.

"Nobody. It must have fallen out in the truck."

Toby relaxed.

"Yeah. Probably."

He looked down the hall, to the elevator, and let out a frustrated sigh. Then, he turned to Harold and leaned on the desk.

"You know I have the vouchers for it. How about a favor for a favor?" Toby grinned, putting on every bit of his chiseled-jaw charm, "I'll buy you a scratch-off."

Harold simply blinked slowly, got up from his seat, and started waving us down with a metal-detecting wand. He sorted out all the weapons Toby had on him, and waved us past with a single open-handed sweep of his arm.

There were a lot of weapons, by the way. Mostly knives, a set of brass knuckles, and the gun I'd seen him mow down a fast food franchise with.

"They let you have weapons in here, huh?" I asked as Harold returned to his perch behind the desk.

"Yeah. I'm basically staff. Plus, it's just a subsite. It's more relaxed."

"So that Harold guy, he's more than one person at the same time?" I asked as the large, metal door slid open with a hideous shriek and we stepped past.

"He's in a lot of places at the same time - until someone sees him, then he's in that one spot. Gets a lot done if no one's looking."

"Oh... Neat."

I want you to imagine a typical public school and a failing insurance agency had an ugly baby. That's what the complex looked like as we casually walked down yet another hall, past closed, numbered door after closed, numbered door. No strange creatures. Not a briefcase in sight, glowing or otherwise. I wish I could give the place some credit for being a liminal space, someplace that felt uncanny and upsetting in its mundanity, but the occasional group of people in white coats, body armor, or both made it impossible to feel alone or lost.

That should've been a positive, but somehow even the observable safety of it all was a let-down.

Eventually, we arrived at a spacious cafeteria with rows of tables and bench seating. The moment we walked in the open archway, I recognized Harold emptying a trash can several rows down, next to a rack of CRP hats marked "SALE - $10 ea".

"This is the mess hall." Toby helpfully elaborated, "People say the grub's fine, but not like they get at a central hub. Those places, they have all the food-related CRPs."

He kept rattling off gibberish as we walked past several tables full of smart-looking people having clinical conversations.

"Self-replicating tacos, the infinite cornucopia, a pizza oven that opens up from the other side of another pizza oven in Sicily. That's all just Hub 15-G. It's great, if you can eat."

"Sick." I acknowledged, "Man. Imagine if we were there, instead."

"Real funny."

Toby stopped at a table near the vending machines and dropped hard onto the bench, startling the others sitting there.

"Here, I wanna introduce you to some people." He slid over on the hard metal, the various pouches and holsters on his belt skidding against the surface.

I sat down next to him and surveyed the group we were joining without invitation. A tall, platinum blonde woman in a silky white dress, a clichéd valley girl in pink, and a pale woman with dark hair to the floor and bangs nearly covering her eyes.

"Ladies. This is Not. He's a good friend of mine, we go way back."

"Not?" the platinum blonde asked, "With a K or without?"

Before I could say a word, the valley girl piped up. Let's be real, though, anything I had to say to a modelesque stunner like that would've just been embarrassing.

"Hi! I'm Becky, the human being!" the valley girl chirped. She gave a small wave across the table, her bangle bracelets jingling. "Is 'Not' a normal name where you come from? Uh, by which I mean, your city or state, not your planet."

She had the nervous energy of a chihuahua if chihuahuas weren't mean as shit.

"I mean, I'm from the same planet as everyone else, after all." She continued unprovoked, placing both hands over her heart and rolling her eyes, "It'd be silly if I wasn't, am I right? We're all just a bunch of normal humans here, eating food and communicating, but not at exactly the same time. As we do."

Toby leaned in and half-whispered, "She's a completely normal person. Got it?"

I didn't get it but I nodded anyway.

Becky took in a deep breath and let it out through pursed lips, like she was breathing out pure anxiety.

"So what do you do? I mean, for employment, not in general, because I know what human beings do from first-hand experience. Breathe oxygen and stuff like that."

"I, uh - Nothing." I replied, at a loss for multiple reasons.

"Not does nothing?" the platinum blonde smirked quietly to herself.

"He's in tech." Toby cleared his throat, "Internet stuff. Real brainy shit. Don't let him get all humble on you."

The pale girl reached one long arm diagonally toward me from where she was sitting, sliding a crumpled ball of paper across the table and in my direction. She never looked up to meet my eyes, but as she turned I could see a jagged scar across her throat.

"Don't take that." Toby warned.

Not wanting to be rude, I reached for the ball of paper anyway.

Toby gave it a flick and sent it flying.

It was my turn to lean in and half-whisper to Toby, now.

"I can't help but notice you're only introducing me to women."

"You're welcome."

Creepy, right? Creepy because of the premise, and creepy because I was pretty sure none of these girls were human, despite what Becky insisted, and creepy because I knew each separate age difference between us was a roadblock.

"Golden Boy." an oddly familiar voice called over from somewhere behind us. It was the same garbled drive-thru speaker voice I had heard while hiding out in Toby's truck weeks earlier.

A man in a bulky, eye-damaging yellow hazmat suit with foam green boots and gloves plodded up to the edge of the table with something in his gloved hands.

"Fuck." Toby grumbled.

"Lotto time. Big winner. Fun for everyone." the hazmat guy squelched out as he slapped three or four scratch-off lotto tickets in front of Toby. "Top prize. $20,000. Maybe new chairs?"

Toby shot me a "can you believe this asshole" look as he pulled a coin out of his pocket and started scratching off the tickets.

My attention was on the blonde in the white dress, as a small cluster of spiders fanned out from her sleeve and used their threads to drag a plastic fork to her hand. Looking her over again, cautiously enough to not be caught staring, I noticed she had been covered with hundreds to thousands of random spiders the entire time.

"Bell. Bell. Bell." Toby said flatly as he scratched off the last ticket. As he passed them back to the speaker-voiced hazmat guy, I could see that each one was a winner.

I remembered what he had told me when we first met. Couldn't die. Good at everything. Never lost. The CRP folks weren't just using him as a weapon, they were using him for extra funding here and there.

"Hmm. One hundred. Five thousand. Five hundred. Ten dollars. No twenty thousand. Disappointing but workable. Next time will be better." the gloved speaker-voiced hazmat guy admonished.

As he walked away, I turned back to the group and gestured toward him with my thumb.

"That's Widdershins." Toby grunted, as if the name tasted sour.

"He's not as bad as he seems." the blonde added, "Just a bit jaded. He's seen a lot of people come and go, so it's probably for the best that he doesn't get attached."

"Is he a CRP, too?" I asked, "The suit, and all. Is he a radioactive robot or something?"

"He's a germaphobe." Toby shook his head and scoffed, "Just another researcher with a hang-up. I swear they're more messed-up than we are. Imagine being afraid of something that’s all around you."

I felt a foot brush against my leg briefly, sending a jolt of surprise and dread up my spine. Looking down under the table, I saw a pale foot retract, leaving behind another crumpled up ball of paper. I didn't take it.

"Yeah, definitely more messed-up." I said in a very unconvincing way.

"Anyway, you know Becky, now." Toby changed topics quickly, "The smoking-hot blonde with the creepy crawlies is Gossamer, and the cursed one is Curse."

This obtuse dork was low-key trying to hook me up with someone named "Curse".

We talked for maybe thirty minutes to an hour. Time honestly flew by pretty fast, and with Becky carrying most of the conversation on her own, there was little room for me to make an ass of myself. Toby was right, the food wasn't amazing, but it was good. After I finished my tray, I went back and complemented Harold on the cooking. He gave me a free brownie and made a shushing motion with his finger.

The funny thing is that, for a moment, I forgot where I was. The cold, yet somehow psychotic babble of the surrounding researchers... the dull hum that was ever-present throughout the entire place... the stark and uncomfortable tone of our surroundings... it all just kind of melted away while Toby lightly ridiculed me, Gossamer said a bunch of nice things she probably didn't actually mean, and Becky went on and on about how much of a human being she was and had always been.

Never an uneasy lapse in conversation. Never a feeling of alienation or walking on eggshells.

I saw it, then. This was the family Toby had chosen to stay with all those years ago. What's more, he was trying in his own way to bring me in.

At that moment, nothing could go wrong.

Then something went wrong.

Two brainiacs, researchers I assume, arrived at one of the vending machines near our table. They spoke loudly and rudely enough to break the dialogue.

"Hey, do you have any change?"

"Of course."

"Well, do you have change for a ten?"

"No problem, I can give you change for a ten."

"Thanks, man."

"Gimme one second. Do you want nine singles and four quarters?"

"Eight singles and eight quarters, if you have it."

"I think I do. Man, you really don't carry anything smaller than a ten?"

"Sorry. Didn't think I'd need change."

"For a ten."

"Right. Change. For a ten dollar bill."

"Alright, there you go. I'll take the ten dollar bill and you take the change."

My eyes widened and I nearly choked on my dessert brownie.

Suddenly, I realized where the guest voucher had gone.

Toby, seeing me in a life-or-death struggle with baked goods, gave me a huge wallop on the back with one open hand, causing me to cough a half-chewed brown lump out onto the table. In front of girls.

"Jesus!" I said in an offended tone, "Thanks, but Jesus!"

"Eat slower. It's not going anywhere."

"That's not why - Okay, I remember where the voucher is, and you have to promise not to get pissed off."

Toby sat straight and visibly tensed up. The entire mood dropped.

"I make no such promise. Out with it."

I quickly explained the interaction I'd had outside the Wacky Taxes storefront, about the crazy bag lady, and how I had probably, maybe, almost absolutely given her a guest access voucher for the CRP Institute instead of the money I intended to hand over.

Without a word, Toby pushed me up from the bench, got up himself, and marched out of the cafeteria. I followed along, thinking we were going to go back upstairs and pay the woman outside for the voucher. Instead, we stopped at the security table where Harold sat stoically.

"Did she look like this?" Toby asked.

"Like what?"

Just as casually as anything else, Harold lifted a single sausage-like finger and pointed to the posters behind him. It was only then that I noticed every woman on every poster was the same. The same face, anyway. Big blue eyes and a crooked grin full of crooked teeth. In each image she was wearing a different wig and a different outfit, and every picture had scary words like "Warning", "Do Not Admit", and "SubCon Threat".

"That... is one thousand percent her."

Toby slammed his palm on the security desk, cracking the glass.

"God DAMN it, Not!"

Harold shook his head disapprovingly.

"Well, you said you had a lot of vouchers." I started, thinking I could diffuse the tension, "Shouldn't be too hard to grab another one, right?"

"That's not the problem. You gave it to Lizzie."

He said this as if I would know what the fuck.

"The girl on the posters?" I asked.

Then, all at once, it hit me. My jaw dropped, I slowly nodded my head in realization, and put my hands on my hips like a soccer mom who had just positively had enough of this funny business.

"She's a THRALL!"

"No!" Toby shouted, "Not everything is a thrall! Very few things are a thrall!!"

"So what do we do?"

Toby turned to Harold.

"Have you let in any guests since we showed up?"

Harold nodded.

"A woman?"

Harold nodded.

"A small, skinny woman who had a perfectly reasonable explanation for covering her face?"

The lights went out.

That ever-present hum was gone.

Toby let out a string of expletives, adding, "I can't see him, but he's nodding."

A moment of complete silence passed.

"Who's Lizzie?" I asked.

Another moment of silence as Toby no doubt bristled in the dark.

"A CRP... or ex-CRP. Minute she earned the staff's trust, she took off with a bunch of stuff. She fucks with your mind, makes you want to do things for her, gain her approval. Anyone with a weak enough will bends over backward to make her happy."

The "weak will" thing hit home. I couldn't even be mad about it, which proved the point.

Emergency lights came on, and a stern voice echoed from speakers in the ceiling.

"DUE TO A PROTOCOL BREACH, LOCKDOWN IS IN EFFECT. WE APPRECIATE YOUR COOPERATION DURING THIS TIME AS SECURITY PERSONNEL WORK TO SECURE THIS FACILITY. PLEASE STAY CALM AND TAKE SHELTER IN THE NEAREST SAFE LOCATION UNTIL FURTHER NOTICE."

"What is it with your bad guys and cutting the power?" I asked genuinely.

Toby was already pulling the metal door open with his bare hands as it let out an ear-splitting metal-on-metal screech in protest.

"Scare tactic, usually. This time it's worse."

As Toby cracked the door open enough to pass through, two armored security thugs arrived, wordlessly swept past us, and joined Harold at his station.

"Golden Boy," one called after us as we were leaving, "Sort it out."

He didn't answer.

Dark hallway. We moved quickly, though I lagged behind. I caught sight of a few researchers ducking into rooms and closing doors that audibly locked behind them. Toby had a headlamp on, shining light wherever he looked. I guess he got the idea from our last adventure. His gun was already out, and he held it with one hand steadying the other like any badass would.

"Are you going to shoot her? Lizzie, I mean."

Visions of Toby previously opening fire on otherwise harmless-looking girls flashed through my head.

"Yeah. Between those freaky little eyes."

"But she's like you... no?"

"No. She's a thief. She lets things loose or collects them like a cat lady. She's monster PETA."

I didn't have a positive opinion of that, but it did call some other things into question for me. If she let CRPs go free, that meant there had to be CRPs being held against their will. Was this a research facility or a prison? Did the CRP "capture, restrain, provoke" anomalous objects and creatures, or did it do that to people, too?

What worried me most of all was - were these actually my thoughts... or hers?

Another armored thug stomped by, and Toby grabbed him by the heavy black vest as he passed.

"Hey. What's open?"

"Everything. All the cells." the thug replied, the quiver in his voice ruining all appearances.

Cells.

There it was.

This was a prison, and the people I had met were just the trustees. Inmates on good behavior who were let out of their box because they posed some benefit for whoever ran this Hell hole. Toby wasn't an action hero working for a clandestine organization, he was a missing boy who identified with his kidnappers.

After the quivering thug disappeared into the darkness down the hall, Toby stopped and turned in place, staring at the walls as if he was looking through them, though I'm pretty sure he couldn't actually do that.

"There's nothing that bad, here." he mumbled to himself, "It's a subsite. Everything here is just really strange and mostly useless. She's just a brain-fucker, she has to find some muscle to pull this off and get out alive..."

Suddenly, he started hustling again.

"C'mon. Remember, you're not here to help or do anything crazy. You're here so I can keep my own eyes on you. I don't lose my men."

I gave a thumbs-up to his back in the dark.

"You're gonna see some weird shit. Don't talk to anything." He added as we reached a second, wide-open metal door with a corridor of numbered doors behind it. Each numbered door was similarly left open.

Part of me wished I had Toby's lamp, but a bigger part of me was glad I didn't.

Shadows moved in many of the doorways. Silhouettes of people and things that didn't make logical sense. The sight of it read like my mind was playing tricks on me. I could see pedestals and display cases in other rooms. Some of the cases were smashed. The rooms that looked completely empty, even in the scant back-up lighting, troubled me the most.

Toby turned his head as a distinctly feline shadow leapt past the beam of his light. No animal, just shadow.

"Aaaand the cats are out again. Great."

Just as suddenly as the cat, another figure popped up out of nowhere.

"Shit!" Toby shouted, training his gun on the target immediately.

Hair pushed back with a headband, pink blouse and flouncy pink shirt, bangle bracelets clattering on her wrists as she waved hello, Toby's headlamp making her eyes glow an eerie, iridescent purple-green.

Becky.

(The human being.)

Toby raised the barrel of his gun in the air and let out a breath.

"Fucking Hell, Becky. What are you doing?"

"Oh, well, like, so, okay. When the lights went out? Alright, so basically I couldn't see, because I'm a normal human being and I can't see in the dark or perceive electrical fields or anything like that."

Toby rolled the gun in the air, gesturing for her to speed it up.

Becky tittered and rolled her eyes with an over-exaggerated shrug before twirling her hair in her finger.

"I got lost, since that's what an average human being would do in this situation! That's me! Klutzy old Becky, just a silly little mortal human female and not a cosmic abomination who recognizes people by their bioelectrical signature."

A pause.

"You're coming with us, Becky."

"Well, there's, like, a problem with that, though." Becky pointed one of her long pink press-on nails down the hall, where a jiggling wad of translucent slime was taking up space. "There's a random jelly or something. I don't know."

Toby didn't waste a second. He was in one of the side rooms quickly, and came back dragging a display case someone had already cracked open.

"We'll get by it through the ceiling. Get up on this."

“Wait, is the slime dangerous, or-”

“I don’t know every CRP, Not.”

Becky was the first one up, pushing one of the ceiling tiles aside before looking back down at the two of us.

"Now don't you watch me go up! Not because you'll see anything like tentacles or an endless black void, maddening in scope and lit only by stars that died eons past... but because it's just rude to look up a girl's skirt!"

We averted our eyes to the floor.

After a shockingly dusty crawl through the ceiling and a drop back into the hall past the rippling, burbling blob-thing, we stopped at a set of blue double doors marked with large, white block letters.

"PHYSICAL TESTING

APPROVED USE ONLY

THANK YOU!"

Toby pressed his ear to the door quietly, waited for a moment, then turned to me, his head lamp shining directly in my face and blinding me until I threw a hand up over my eyes.

"CRP-6001. The Growing Problem."

"Bro, you have got to stop saying things you know I won't understand and just cut directly to the bullet points."

Toby huffed. Great time to be offended.

"You'll see, then."

Toby kicked in the doors with a guttural war cry, handgun leading the way.

It was a gym. Basically. High ceiling, wide space, floor marked for measuring distance. Rolled up gym mats and a cage of dodgeballs stood next to a crowd of human-shaped targets leaning against the wall. This was where the researchers figured out what exactly a CRP could do, and how well they did it.

I only noticed all of that later, though. What most caught my attention the instant the doors flew open was the giant, elongated man hunched over in the middle of the room. Long legs bent and long arms cramped, elbows to each far wall.

The guy was massive, but lanky. My line of sight followed from one large foot up the twisted tree trunk of a leg, past protruding ribs, up to an emaciated face with tremendous, staring eyes and pointed, angular facial features. His bald, spotty head touched the ceiling, right next to a center spotlight that cast shadows on him as if he were about to tell a spooky campfire story.

His flesh was taut, eyes sunken, thin lips drawn back. Everything about him seemed to show he had outgrown his own skin, or at least it hadn’t caught up with him yet.

Just the sight of him, knowing something like that could exist, did things to my sense of overall security in this world that I can't even describe. The Lovecraftian concept of looking upon something and going stark-raving mad was no longer just an interesting idea, it was very feasible. I felt cold, and every instinct told me to lay down, knees to chest, and close my eyes until the world made sense again. All it took was an unusually large man.

He leered down at me, Toby, and Becky, before raising his hands and showing off what he was holding.

It was Widdershins, looking like a biohazard-ready babydoll in the hands of a pro basketball player. One massive, boney hand was clasped around his chest, and another huge hand was holding his entire arm out at his side.

"Stay out there or I pull this one apart." came a slow, rumbling utterance from the tremendous man's lumpy throat, “Gingerbread man style.”

"Shoot him." Widdershins shouted through his distorted speaker, "My life. One life. No value. Greater purpose. Pull the trigger."

"Not how I roll." Toby called back.

Widdershins thought for a moment.

"Shoot me." he shouted, "Preferable to dismemberment. Quicker."

"Pessimist piece of shit." Toby growled under his breath.

The giant man swung his head low, neck popping and squelching as he did so. It was like he was getting a better look at hors d’oeuvres on a platter. His uncomfortably warm breath reeked of spoiled milk or cottage cheese or something putrid and dairy, and it was powerful enough to rustle my hair as he spoke..

“Look at you... Three blind mice, timid and twitching. Not so big now, hmm?” his yellowed teeth glistened with saliva as he gave a sick grin.

"I see the brawn," I yelled into the echo-chamber of the gym, "Where are the brains?" I stole the line from Early Bird #142, when he fought the Gray Ghoul.

Toby gave me a look that reminded me he told me not to help.

Lizzie stepped out of the shadows, between the giant, gaunt man's feet. She leaned against one of his yellowed, overgrown toenails and smirked. At least I think she smirked. The lighting wasn't great. Her hair was dark now, pulled into a ponytail that meant business.

"It’s my favorite altruist!" she cooed.

All at once I felt a cold grip on my heart. She recognized me, and it made me feel really good... which made me feel really scared.

"Tell big boy to put the egg head down, Lizzie. You're either getting walked back into a cell... or potato-sacked into an unmarked grave."

Toby's tone and timber was disturbing me almost as much as Lizzie tugging on my cockles.

"I don't think I want to..." Lizzie sang, before spinning in a small circle on her toes, "I don't think I want to. I don't think I want to."

She stopped spinning and pranced straight up to us, showing zero fear in the path of Toby's pistol.

"Haven't you ever wondered what'll happen, Golden Boy?" she asked. I will still, to this day, swear there was legitimate compassion in her voice, "When you're not useful anymore? When you're no fun? When you're just another misfit dog in the kill shelter? Too mean to love. Too old to adopt. It's just not right. It's not fair."

I didn't realize Toby had his finger off the trigger until that moment, when he put it on.

"Ask yourself, are you really so unique?" She continued, "Are you sure there aren't others like you? Immune to karma, ready to be exploited in return for some treats? All that separates you from my super-size pet back there is that your peculiarities come in handy. Why should you come and go as you please, when he can't?"

Hearing this, the giant man tightened his grip, or at least that's what I assume since Widdershins let out an involuntary squeak.

"Lizzie, your 'pet' grows to fill his environment, like a goldfish. Do you even understand what that means if he's let outdoors?"

At that point, I realized Toby didn't hate explaining things. That was just a part of his bad-ass routine. He secretly loved that shit... and I'll be damned if he wasn't good at getting exposition in.

"One can be indoors and still be free." Lizzie replied in a lilting voice, saying it as if she was reading the ending moral from a children's storybook.

"Lizzie, when the CRP found him he was eating people."

"We're all part of the food chain. It's nature."

Lizzie turned her attention to me.

"I wonder how you know Golden Boy. Friend? Family? He likes you a lot. I can tell."

"Don't talk to him." Toby pressed the barrel to her temple, "This is you and me, right now, and we're talking about how you're going to let Widdershins down."

She ignored him.

"Wow. He's very angry. Family it is."

"Yeah." I answered. Neither of us were doing what Toby wanted, now.

"You sure have seen a lot today, haven't you?"

My eyes darted to Toby, and as I expected, he looked beyond annoyed with me.

"W-what do you mean?"

Lizzie leaned away from the gun with a graceful flourish and danced her way back to the creature's giant toes, singing all the way.

"A lot of things you shouldn't see... a lot of things you shouldn't see... lots and lots you shouldn't see..."

I turned to Toby. Becky was absent-mindedly standing between us at that point, so I had to lean around her to talk to him.

"They're going to wipe my memory now, because of all this!" I all but screamed.

"This isn't the time." Toby scolded.

"Dude, wait. Even if nothing had gone wrong, you still showed me a lot of shit..."

"Not the time."

"Were you always going to let them wipe my memory?!"

"Not, I am on my last nerve with this shit. People get their memories erased all the time. It happens. They get over it and go on with life."

"Specifically BECAUSE they don't know it happened!"

Lizzie laughed. It was a sweet, adorkable laugh that still warms my insides and I'm not sure but I feel like I'm probably still under her influence a little bit.

With a pointed turn of her head, she regarded me over her shoulder. She sounded dead serious.

"How many times do you suppose you've been here?"

...

Toby had a huge amount of vouchers saved up across years, with no one to use them.

He was bringing me to the CRP over and over again, showing me off, showing the place off to me, introducing me to different people per visit. Basking anew in my reactions to his cool lifestyle, each and every time.

The only one who would know was Harold, and he couldn't say anything. Literally. No wonder the site's security expert didn't need to see my voucher this time.

Well... one other person knew.

Lizzie must've been scoping the location out, watching and waiting... Watching me and Toby walk in and out over and over again, and waiting for a moment when he left me alone outside. All so she could mentally finesse the voucher off of me.

"You absolute fuckwad..." I muttered, dumbfounded.

"This is what she does, Not. Manipulate people, drive them apart until she's all they have. These are literal mind games in every sense of the word."

"This is awkward." Becky interjected, "I feel uncomfortable, now... Is that right? A human being, like me, would feel uncomfortable in a situation like this. Yup. Sweat excreted from millions of tiny holes in my epidermis, colorful flying insects in my stomach, very uncomfortable.”"

"Focus on the guy who's about to be ripped in half." Toby said through gritted teeth, aiming back at the head of the large man.

"So shoot him." I said, flustered, throwing my hands up in frustration.

"Skull's too thick."

"Then shoot him in the eye, dipshit!"

Toby cocked his head to the side a bit, readjusted his aim, and fired.

Splat.

I don't know if you've ever seen an eyeball rupture - but I assume it's still very unpleasant to look at, even if the eye itself isn't larger than a beach ball. Just goop and blood and bloody goop.

Widdershins slid around in a pool of ocular gel, trying and failing to gain footing after the giant man dropped him and gripped at his own face.

The giant yelled, clutching the oozing wound.

Widdershins yelled, since he was a germaphobe.

"Noooo!" Lizzie screamed, rushing to the giant's side like a kid who just saw her rabbit get run over by a semi, "You're fine! Don't worry, you're fine!"

Unthinking and in a pained frenzy, the giant slapped Lizzie away, sending her flying into the hall, hitting the door frame on the way.

Toby holstered his gun and fireman-carried Lizzie as she listlessly draped over his shoulders like a clock from a Dali painting. Droopy, dead weight.

“I thought you said you were going to shoot her.” I wasn’t disappointed, just confused..

“I still will at some point.”

He turned to Becky.

"Beckers, be a peach and get rid of the expanding cannibal before he buries us all in concrete."

"Me? Well, I don't know what I could possibly do, but I guess I could, like, give it a shot. I mean, us human women are all about girl power and stuff. Hey - we're every bit as capable as the males, am I right?"

The giant howled and pounded the walls with his free fist, blowing out shards of cement and shaking ceiling tiles loose as Becky confidently strode into the gym.

Widdershins scrambled out, shrieking like a droid and flicking eye juice from his arms and hands. No "thank you", no nothing, just screaming, slipping, and running, probably to the closest decontamination shower.

"Close the doors, Not."

I did as I was told, and the moment I pushed the steel doors shut, they buckled inward with a crumpling crunch sound. Like something sucked all the air out in a fraction of a second.

Behind the bent doors, there was no more noise.

Not long after, Becky screeched one of the doors open just wide enough to squeeze through. She shook her head and shrugged again. She was the picture of put-together. Not even her hair was mussed.

"Welp, that huge ol' scary man is gone, somehow. I have no idea where or why!"

I suspect Becky might not be a human being.

The walk back through the facility was surreal. Seeing my fully-lit surroundings in reverse was off-putting, knowing I had come all that way in near complete darkness.

Some of the figures in the doorways weren't as frightening as I first thought. Others were. Some were worse.

Security guards were everywhere, along with a smaller group of medics that were buzzing like worried flies around anyone who seemed even slightly injured.

All the way along, Toby carried Lizzie's unconscious body. We passed staff member after staff member, all the way back to the cafeteria door.

"It’s Little Lizzie, again." Toby said flatly as he dropped her to the floor at a mobile medical kiosk. "She’s an extreme SubCon threat, but unconscious, so we're good. Don't wake her up until she's in a cell... or at least strapped down."

I didn't know how to feel about that.

Less than three steps later, Widdershins was in front of us, wearing a crisp new hazmat suit.

"Said you are family. Brothers?" He squawked, "Shared abilities, perhaps? Another immortal? A winner?"

"I was hoping you were too terrified to remember that." Toby said.

Widdershins produced a quarter from somewhere and held it between his thumb and pointer finger, showing it to me.

"Testing begins. Heads or tails?"

"Heads." I decided.

Widdershins flipped the coin, caught it, and slapped it onto the back of his glove. He peeked under his hand.

"Tails. Testing concluded."

Toby put his arm around Widdershins and walked him along with us as we continued back toward the exit.

"You're not going to tell anyone."

"Have to. Protocol. Familial documentation incomplete."

"I wasn't asking."

"Threats follow."

"Damn right they do. If you breathe this to another soul, not only will I stop scratching tickets, I'll clap your ears so hard you'll hear three bells for the rest of what will be a short life."

"I have predicted correctly. Low-minded. Brutish."

"So you're not going to tell anyone."

"Familial data pending verification. Verification scheduled for never."

“Good.”

As we sat in Toby's truck outside the Wacky Taxes office, I quietly wondered when the mind wipe was coming. As much as I hated the idea, as much as I disliked Toby for subjecting me to it, there was little hope in escaping an organization that kept everything I had just seen in check. Usually.

"So is it an injection? A flash? A blow on the head?"

Toby turned the key, his asshole-grade engine coming to life.

"Everything's in disarray, no one's going to notice a missed wipe. I should've stopped scrambling your brain after two or three times, anyway." he admitted, before adding, “Any nosebleeds lately?”

"Two or three?! You.." I collected myself and shoved down the outrage, calming my tone, "Some would say, in a perfect world, you would not have done this even once."

I looked out my window, back to the unassuming strip mall over the most confusing and disturbing place I'd ever seen. Around the side of the building, Lizzie, with one strap of her dress cut and her shoulder bandaged, directed a pair of medical staff as they loaded a small amount of boxes into a rented moving truck. She was limping, and the medics were in an obvious state of induced bliss.

Maybe it was the uncertainty of all the moral gray I'd been confronted with, maybe it was just Lizzie still rattling around in my thoughts. I didn't say anything. Until now, I guess.

The trip home was nothing to speak of. More AC/DC, which I had forgotten about until "Big Balls" started playing, at which point I shouted "NO!"

The drop-off wasn’t spectacular either. Just two guys parting ways..

"Sorry." Toby said, looking forward as I stood by the driver's side window. That was it. That was all I'd get out of him.

"Listen, man." I explained, "All my life I've been trying to live up to an impossible standard. To fill the shoes of a God, as far as our parents were concerned."

I put my hand on his shoulder meaningfully and continued.

"Really, now that you're back, you've given me the best gift I could've asked for. Now I know there IS no lofty goal that I never reached. No bar I failed to pass."

I squeezed his impossibly muscle-bound shoulder kindly.

"You're just a lying, insecure bitch like everyone else."

I had worked on the speech during the trip.

"Making me regret this instantly. Interesting choice." Toby mused before throwing the truck in gear and peeling out. Again.

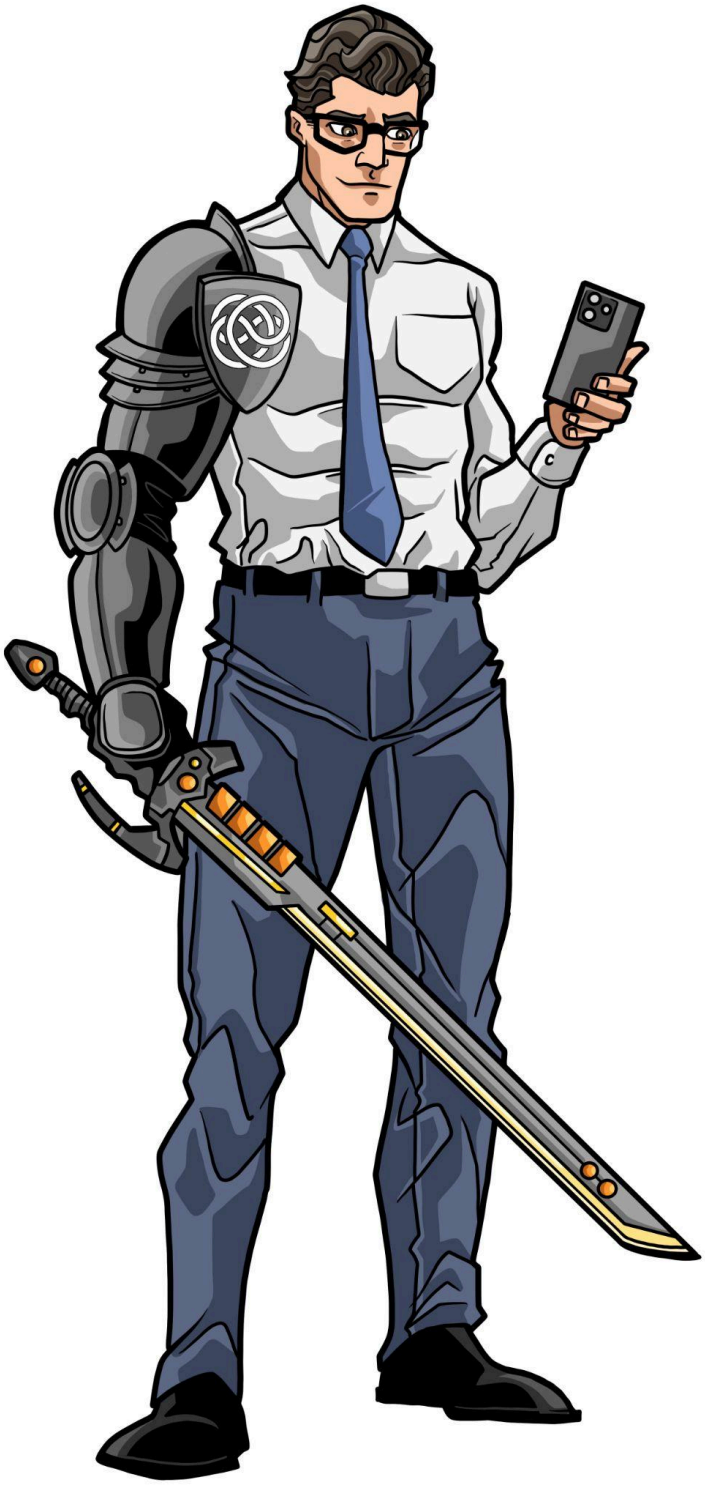
Exhausted, I plodded around the house to the backyard, where the dog dish was once again lying upside-down in the dirt.

When I picked up the bowl, I let out a weak laugh.

A faded, weather-worn little package was hidden under the metal dish. One that probably came from a garbage can or had been left by the side of the road, somewhere.

It was a Miner Meal box.

My Dumb Dead Brother Hates Me



Very few things in life prepare you for just how bad the human body can smell.

Those few things are old cheese, rancid hot dogs, and onions.

Give it enough time and a complete lack of personal effort, and you can get a real putrid haze of reek going on. With patience and a strong stomach, you can work up the kind of stench that would bring a decades-long coma patient out of convalescence.

Trust me. I've been to comic book conventions.

So, when I tell you that the random thrall... the dower burger girl who formerly served a demon I'm pretty sure came from an actually-exists Hell... when I tell you that she stank like nothing I've known before or since on the face of planet Earth, you should take that pretty seriously.

I started out coaxing her from the tree line with food and drinks. Once I saw the miner meal box she had left for me, a light went off in my head. I started bringing the spare leftovers in old fast food wrappers and paper cups. Almost immediately, instead of watching from who-knows-where and waiting until I was gone, she would scramble out of hiding, grab everything from me, and return to whatever cave or burrow she found out there in the undeveloped property behind the house.

Over the months, she had acquired a second skin of black grime. "Thrall goop", I guess, as my brother had so directly put it. Her eyes shimmered like puddles of oily water on the black top of a parking lot. That probably sounds oddly poetic, but nothing about it was pleasant.

The Burger Load uniform had seen better days. The already ugly outfit gradually became tattered and covered in mud, mold, and lichens.

I openly and uncontrollably wretched the first few times she came out. It was like someone crammed a sock full of ancient dog shit in each nostril.

"Hey." I waved, awkwardly, on one of the last times she emerged from the brush.

"Friend." I continued, as black fingernails, more like a crow's talons by now, ripped a cup of Poppo Cola from my already band-aid flecked hand. "I'm friend. Saved you. Remember?"

I'd been through this countless times by that point, and I was about to give up trying. Really, at the end of the day, I just wanted her to stop showing up so I didn't have to worry about her breaking into the house and filleting one of my parents in their sleep... or whatever. That's incredibly specific, but you get the idea.

Just my luck, this was the moment she hoisted herself up onto a stack of heat-saver roofing tiles dad bought and never got around to working with.

“That’s right.” I nodded, keeping distance and rotating up-wind, my movements slow and measured, “Friend. Okay to stay. No run.”

She narrowed her blank, shark eyes at me, smirked with her black-blooded leech lips, and tilted her head sarcastically.

“I’m not a fucking squirrel, ya dumb bitch.”

“Oh.” I relaxed on the outside, but tensed on the inside, “Uh, yeah. I know that. But I mean, you do look like a greasy paralysis demon.”

“No I don’t.” She said flatly, through a mouthful of stale liver I had hidden away the previous night.

She did.

“As much as I appreciate that you - uh - trust me and all -”

“I don’t trust you.”

“You don’t? Really?!” I said, loudly, the hurt coming through completely unfiltered, “But you left me the miner meal box, like as a message.”

She stopped chewing, her fanged jaw hanging open, as she rolled her eyes and then fixed them on me again. At least, I assume she did since they were all pupil.

“Uhh, hello? I was manipulating you. And you know what else? It worked.” She bobbed her head flippantly.

“Whatever, dude. Do you want me to hose you off or find an old kiddie pool or what? You’re like someone dipped a giant sewer rat in a molasses of liquified cadavers.”

“That’s a stupid metaphor.”

“I know! Wash yourself, you gross freak!”

So, I ended up frantically steam-cleaning black footprints out of the carpet as the thrall showered upstairs.

(Come on. You’ve been with me this long, don’t make it weird, now.)

I always made sure to put her food out when there was no one around to see what I was up to. At that point, Dad was working, and mom would be gone for an unknown amount of time that could end at any moment, so I went into cleaning overdrive. It seemed like, for every blotch I found, there was another smear to be discovered.

This jackass ran her hand along the bannister, all the way up. On purpose, I’m sure.

I had a few more things to go over when I heard the shower stop. I'd have to throw some things into a closet and hope no one found them before I could thoroughly scrub them down.

"There she is." I said in the way a very, very out-of-touch boomer would as I saw her at the top of the stairs. I leaned my elbow on a mop.

Gone were the dark eyes, the sharp teeth, and the layers of funk. She almost looked like any average moody chick trying to show her hyper-religious parents who's boss. The only thing that clashed with that overall style was the powder blue towel wrapped around her.

She looked me up and down from on high, then made a disgusted face, as if she were looking at the subhuman abomination, now.

"Drain's clogged."

Neat. Another thing to fix before anyone noticed.

She disappeared back into the upstairs hallway, and for a time my attention was strictly on the busywork at hand. It wasn't until mom pulled into the driveway, Shania Twain blasting, that I felt the cold grip of panic that comes with knowing you covered every base, but suspecting that you didn't.

"What's going on here?"

The tone of Mom's voice was the most chilling thing I'd experienced (so far) that day.

She closed the front door behind her and looked around the foyer slowly, ending on an unreadable glance in my direction.

"I can explain." I noted, despite having absolutely no idea what I would be explaining.

She sniffed the air.

Uh oh.

"Nice." she finally stated, nodding slightly.

The cleaner was overtaking the thrall odor. Good deal. It had been a while, so my sense of smell was all out of whack. The room just smelled like nothing to me at that point.

"Keep it up." Mom pointed at me with a smile, something that only happened when I was being a good housekeeper. As she rounded the corner to the kitchen and was out of sight, she added the typical asterisk. "Toby used to love his chores... he would tidy things up every day, not just once in a blue moon."

Confidant that I had covered up every detail and erased every sign of an “intruder” to the family home, I breathed a heavy sigh of relief and plodded back up to my room.

There was something I had forgotten.

“Assface.”

The thrall was sitting in the middle of my floor, criss-cross style, wearing a random clutter of old clothes from the closet floor. This included my favorite bulky, black sweatshirt - the one I thought was cool as fuck until someone at school pulled the strings in front of everyone and closed my face in the hood. It hadn’t seen the light of day since.

She had also found the pair of heelys I had outgrown years ago, both in size and concept.

“Oh, shit.” I placed my hands to my head like a terrible stage actor and looked out into the hallway before leaping in and shutting the door behind me.

“The window.” I said frantically, pulling it open, “Go out the window.”

“It’s the second story, idiot.”

“Yeah but you’re not human.”

“Thank fuck.”

“Jump out the window! Now!”

With an exaggerated huff, she stood up and peered out the opening with a skeptical glare.

“Not happening.”

I tried to help her make the jump, by which I mean I physically shoved her a bit as she grabbed onto me, intent on dragging us both out if she went.

Now, if this were a shitty romantic comedy, you’d expect my mom to throw the door open and walk into the room. She would misunderstand the entire situation, thinking I had brought a completely normal (somewhat normal) girl to the house in her absence. Unable to fully explain the situation, hijinks would ensue.

But no.

“Alright, well if you’re going to stay, I need you to do what I say!” I all but pleaded with the thrall, intending for her to find a place to hide and shut her toilet mouth until I thought of a better plan.

“Oh, man. Here we go.” She clucked her tongue, sighed, looked at the ceiling, and started to unzip the hoodie. “I’m not gonna look at you, though.”

“No, I-”

The door flew open and my mom walked into the room.

“Are you talking to - Oh!” she all but shouted in surprise.

The thrall regarded her with a sideways glance and pushed the zipper back up.

“You..” mom was struggling to find the words, “I...”

She pointed at the thrall, then looked at me quizzically.

“That’s a girl.”

“I know, mom.”

Mom leaned on the door frame, folding her arms.

“Why don’t I know her? You don’t introduce your mother to your girlfriend?!”

“She’s not-”

There were plenty of ways to finish that sentence. Not my girlfriend. Not human. Not pleasant to be around. Not safe to be in the same room with.

“Don’t let her steal anything. She looks stealy.”

“MOM!!”

The thrall pressed her bottom lip under her teeth, starting the “F” to what was clearly going to be “Fuck you”. I shot her a look and, to my surprise, she stopped, regarding me with what could’ve been begrudging respect or icy cold hatred. Something somewhere in there.

Instead, she let her voice drop into a gravelly monotone and droned, “Good afternoon, ma’am. Your quality concerns are important to us. Please let us know if you have any questions or comments.”

With that, I quickly fabricated a detailed lie so complex in nature that it had to be true. I explained that the thrall worked at Burger Load, which everyone knew blew up in a freak grill accident long ago. Since she was out of work, the thrall had fallen behind on the rent her drug-addled parents charged her for the honor of living in their pantry. Their own daughter, can you believe it? The only thing worse than having to pick up crack pipes and syringes every morning was the vicious beatings each night, and trying to sleep to the sound of gunshots and dogfights on the back lawn. Naturally,

with no job and no cash, she needed a place to stay until the test results came back and she found out if the cancer in her pancreas was spreading.

Taking the spew of word salad in, mom sat on my bed and tapped her chin in thought.

“Alright…” she mused quietly, before looking at each of us with a concerned expression. “I just want to make sure you two are being safe.”

“What?!” I demanded. After every horrible lie I had just told, that was her take away.

“Last thing we need is another little one of these running around, right?” Mom smirked at the thrall, gesturing to me with her thumb.

The heat of embarrassment painted my face beet red, and when I turned to the thrall for some measure of understanding and commiseration, I instead found her grinning ear to ear like the evil ghoul she was. Beads of sweat were forming on my face, under my arms, everywhere you don’t want sweat, which is anywhere.

Then, a portal opened outside the window.

A stranger in a dress shirt and necktie stood inside the shimmering, iridescent ring.

“C’mon.” the man shouted, gesturing for me to join him with one large sweep of his arm.

“Gotta go. Portal.” I shouted over the weird theremin-like squeal of reality itself being ripped open.

I all but leapt through, pulling the thrall with me by her oversized sleeve. As the portal wobbled, contorted, and faded out behind us, all I could see was the shocked and horrified expression of my mother’s face as she went completely pale with terror.

“Holy shit, thank you.” I wiped my brow and turned to the professionally-dressed man who had just saved me from mild discomfort.

“Stan.” he held out a hand, “Stan Watson.”

I went to shake his hand, only to clumsily accept the business card he was trying to pass to me.

Stan Watson, Tax Adjuster. A phone number was printed below that, but I’m not going to dox him.

“Turn it over.” he added.

Stan Watson, Inter-Dimensional Adventurer, same phone number.

I was confused.

“What’s a tax adjuster?”

“No time to explain,” Stan snapped, turning and walking away from me and the thrall, “There’s a lot to do.”

It wasn’t until that moment that I looked around at my surroundings. Stan walked off down a long, sparsely lit hallway with a floor, walls, and a ceiling of black marble. He was toting a platinum sword, meticulously crafted and ornately designed, with several expensive-looking gemstones set in the hilt.

His sword-wielding hand, his entire arm, actually, was covered by a carapace of pristine dark-ages armor. Gauntlet, arm guard, elbow guard... medieval and shimmering like he’d given a J.R.R. Tolkien a shoulder-deep prostate exam.

“Where are we?” I called after him.

He didn’t turn around.

“The Hallroom.” his voice echoed back.

Thank God that was cleared up!

I took a few steps before noticing that the thrall wasn’t coming with me. I turned and waved for her to follow, but she was as still as a stone.

“Let’s go.” I urged, “Don’t freak out, this is probably just a CRP thing.”

Her eyes widened when I spoke the name. I don’t think it eased her nerves at all.

“Oh, right.” I slapped my forehead, “I’m an idiot. Okay, so they killed your demon friend, or boyfriend, or manager, or whatever. But... I mean you gotta realize that shit was no good, right? Like, that was probably a really abusive relationship. Him being a demon and all.”

Her eyes flicked to the left and right, clearly taking in her options for escape. It was one long hall that seemed to stretch on forever. Not a door in sight.

I said the cheesiest thing that came to mind, since it was the only thing that came to mind.

“I won’t let them hurt you. I already proved that.”

I held out my hand, fully expecting a set of black nails to slit my wrist in a blur of motion, after which, the last thing I would see would be a pair of my own heelys gliding off into the distance as everything went black.

She took my hand.

It would've been a nice moment if her hands weren't as cold as an autopsy table. I assume.

"Let's juuust..." I pulled her sleeve over her hand like a glove and held onto it again.

Like any modern teenager, I usually pride myself on being visibly uninterested in most everything around me. However, as we followed the oddly uptight businessman with the epic fantasy sword, I was all questions.

"Are you a CRP?" I asked.

"No. The sword is." Stan Watson answered.

"So the sword made the portal?"

"Precisely."

"How did you get it?"

"Prophecy."

That was the answer I wanted.

"You were chosen to wield it? That's awesome. Can anyone hold it, or is it one of those things where it's bonded with its user?"

"You can't hold it."

"I'm not - I mean, yeah, I would hold if you offered. But that wasn't..."

The thrall made a low, guttural groan and I couldn't tell if it was apprehension or second-hand embarrassment.

The walking went on for what seemed like ages. Nothing but featureless black marble as far as the eye could see in either direction.

After a brief period of silence, devoid of my many, many questions, Stan Watson stopped and spoke.

"Hang on. I think this is the wrong way."

The three of us turned around, took about seven steps, and were faced with a door.

"I can never remember which direction is the recursive one."

Stan Watson pulled the door open, and I fully expected to be met with blinding light or an impossible escher painting of an interior. Instead, it lead to a more spacious, octagonal room made of the same black marble.

Several CRP researchers, each in their lab coats and almost all wearing thick-rimmed glasses, milled busily around four tables at the north, south, east, and west walls. Widdershins, in his absurd protective yellow suit, stood out in the group, like a sore thumb covered in nacho dust.

“If you can teleport people, why not just bring us right here?” I asked.

“A portal would scatter the papers.” Stan Watson explained without skipping a beat.

As we pushed through the criss-crossing paths of migrating nerds, I saw the focal point of the place. A large, ancient wooden table, octagonal in design, just like its surroundings. Stacks of papers and file folders were spread out all over the expansive surface.

I barely recognized Toby, even though he was the only one sitting at the center table.

He had a beard. Not a purposeful beard, but the kind you get when you’re busy not thinking about beards. Stubbly, but quickly getting out of hand. He looked tired, and instead of the usual military surplus jumble, he was wearing a tank top with a couple stains on the front.

“Not, there you are!” Toby jumped up from his chair, causing it to screech against the floor. Everyone held their ears as the piercing sound ricocheted around the echo chamber.

“Heeyy, guy I may or may not know…” I called out cautiously, circling the table to greet him, “How you been doing…?”

Stan Watson, now scrolling through his phone, answered for him.

“Golden Boy has been awake for 72 hours. He hasn’t said anything of any use for the past day, other than asking the CRP to bring you here. Apparently, it was such a pressing demand that I had to climb off of a particularly grateful extra-dimensional princess to retrieve you.”

Stan Watson lowered his phone for a moment and arched an eyebrow at me.

“Who are you to him, exactly?”

“Not, here, is an advisor from a sister organization.” It was Toby’s turn to cut someone off, now, “I met him on a mission, can’t talk about it. He isn’t much to look at or talk to, but he comes through with a buzzer-beater when it counts.”

A back-handed compliment that used both hands.

I looked back for a moment to see where the thrall had gotten to, only to see her leg disappearing under the table as she skulked beneath it.

“What is this about? It’s like a war room in here.” I gestured to the hubbub around us.

“I told you it’s the Hallroom.” Stan Watson restated.

Toby threw a beefy, unwashed arm around Stan Watson’s shoulder and walked him off.

“Alright, bean counter. Thanks for your help. Why don’t you go text that princess of yours and send a sword pic or something?”

In Toby’s brief absence, I looked over the papers that had been laid out in front of him. Hundreds of photos and documents depicted and described a series of beings, from relatively normal-looking people seated in white rooms, to horrific creatures on trail cam snapshots and cctv screen captures. The more I looked between the images, the more they jumbled together until I couldn’t exactly tell what was an average human face and what was a blighted horror.

I knew I shouldn’t read anything, but in that moment, I read a lot of stuff.

CRP-5550, Pencilneck...

CRP-0061, Kimmy-Ken...

CRP-0002, Toilet Paper Person...

CRP-1234, A Man Apart...

There was no end to the carefully organized madness.

A guy made of old stuffed animals and blankets, the ghost of a Hot Topic manager, a U.S. President no one remembers, someone who perpetually vomits rats.. The CRP had it all.

I picked up the page that had been right at Toby’s fingertips when I arrived.

CRP-7433, The Golden Boy.

My eyes darted around the page, taking in lines completely at random.

- Subject expressed a wish to return home. Suggest counter-offer of ice cream.
- Subject is repeatedly inquiring about the status of a pet rabbit. It has been suggested that we provide subject a taxidermied oryctolagus cuniculus of similar visual appearance.
- Researcher J.P. Kisk assigned to sing lullabies to subject before sleep period. Night terrors will ideally lessen, if not cease entirely.
- Subject exhibits high pain tolerance.
- Subject inconsolable. Researchers instructed to ignore subject until vocalization ceases.

Depression, repressed rage, hyper-violence, inadequacy, hydrophobia, overcompensation.

Isolated, reprimanded, incentivized, weaponized.

I'm a quick reader.

"Don't worry about that." Toby shook his head dismissively and took the paper from my hands, stuffing it under a small stack of file folders. "I need your help with something. Have a seat."

Toby dropped into the old wooden chair positioned at the table, leaving nowhere for me to sit. I ended up climbing onto the table, my legs dangling off.

"You do comic books, right?" Toby asked earnestly.

"Very strange way to phrase it, but yeah."

"Okay, so, okay..." Toby held his hands out as if he was framing an invisible picture, "You know how the characters team up and form groups and all that shit, right? Like The Councilmen or The Atomic Seven?"

It was probably no coincidence that he only named properties which had recent movie adaptations.

"Yes, I'm familiar with super-heros." the tone in my voice meant to urge him on, "I've been collecting comics since I was kid. I was there when Dog-O-War died, and I wrote an angry letter to the editor when they replaced him."

Toby gave a thumbs-up, then mussed a few files together almost frantically. I'd never seen him flustered to any degree, but that wasn't saying much since this was the third time I'd ever seen him at all. Discounting the times I couldn't remember, anymore.

"Cool. Cool. Alright." He lowered his voice and glanced at a few of the researchers. "So the CRP wants me to put together a small team of-"

From my seat on the table, I leaned over and grabbed Toby by the shoulders, giving him a steely, incredibly serious look straight-on.

"Stop talking, I was born for this."

Once I had taken over Toby's chair and I had shuffled through a few files, I could see what had been causing him so much stress across the past few days.

"There's a fuckton of overpowered weirdos to choose from... You have option paralysis." I told him, holding the paperwork for two completely unrelated living mannequin CRPs in my hands.

“Tell me about it.” he blew out a hot breath, cheeks puffed and eyes bugged.

“I’m sure the scientists here would help pick out a group for whatever it is you have to do. Not that I’m ungrateful, but why ask me?”

“Because that’s how it always goes. The higher-ups bring me into a mission, I meet the crew, we rip something’s head off, and I call it a day. That’s grunt shit. This is my shot to prove I can do more. It’s a test. I have to assemble a crack team, we have to get in, we have to all get out, and we have to win. Normally that’s not an issue for me, but… ”

“It’s different when you’re the one sending people into harm’s way.”

“Yeah.”

“Same thing happened to The Caterpillar when he had to call in reinforcements to stop the Silk Spy in the Wild Wars maxi-series.”

“I don’t know what that means, but it’s probably right.”

I slid the papers back into their respective folders… or at least I think I did. They were both about mannequins so I can’t say for sure. Then, with a quick survey of the very-distracted researchers all around, I got to the heart of the issue.

“What’s the threat?”

Toby chuckled, presumably at my attempt to sound like I actually knew what I was doing, then pulled a thin gray folder from one of the stacks.

“Don’t freak out.” He warned.

Hearing that, I of course began the internal process of freaking out.

CRP-TBD, The Screamcatcher

Photograph after photograph of jungle locales passed by as I flipped through the pages. In each image, spider webs like razor wire hung between trees and structures. Each glistening pattern was home to multiple corpses.

Withered, husk-like corpses with eyes wide and mouths frozen in mid-scream.

“I’ve seen worse.” I flipped to the end.

“Oh, really?”

“Yeah, the great Burger Load massacre, remember?”

“Ah, right.”

The final photograph was of a shadowy, blurry figure. Mostly human, but also very obviously part arachnid. I don't say "spider" because it was more than that. Spider, scorpion, tick. This revolting thing had it all.

The accompanying text wasn't much help beyond that.

- The Screamcatcher (finalized name pending) appears to be an arachnid/human hybrid measuring [redacted] meters in height, based on landmarks appearing in photograph. Discovered in [redacted], [redacted] on [redacted], locals claim subject is the essence of a forgotten deity. Subject allegedly possessed a coffee farmer by the name of [redacted] before absorbing the physical mass of various species of arachnid into what constitutes its mortal form.
- Subject appears to be responsible for numerous local killings and missing persons cases. Subject appears to [redacted] from its [redacted], which causes [redacted] in human prey. Though clinically deceased, cadavers hung from subject's webbing continue to scream ceaselessly beyond death.

It dragged on for a few more pointless paragraphs.

"Well this is useless." I snorted, "Why is it blacked out if they expect you to help them?"

"My clearance is high, but not that high." Toby said, as if this was only to be expected.

Under the table, I felt the distinct feeling of my shoes being unlaced.

"Well, what's the good ending, then?" I asked, maintaining composure, "Capture it? Kill it? I mean, I would guess the idea is to kill it if they're asking you to run things."

"Capture if possible, kill if necessary. The brainiacs want to understand how it keeps people shrieking in terror after they die. They think it could be some key to eternal life, or whatever the fuck. It's always about eternal life with these assholes."

Toby looked up and shouted to every researcher in earshot, which was all of them.

"Living forever, just so you can glue your nose to a bunch of dusty old pages. Really fucking worth it."

"Well, that spider lady is probably my first suggestion. This thing is sort of a spider, she talks to spiders. Easy choice."

Toby laughed out loud.

"Gossamer? Kid, I get that she's a knockout, but if you want to see what's under the cobwebs, there are other ways. You don't need to take up a slot on the roster."

“This is what you portal-napped me to do. Not every member of a team should be a tank. You need to diversify, spread out the power levels. Otherwise you get a handful of half-wits who think punching solves everything. Let the spider lady try to talk to the spider monster. It’s the most brainless of no-brainers.”

Toby shrugged.

“Alright, we’ll give it a shot.”

I sat back in the chair and fumbled with a folder for a bit.

“The thing is, I met Gossamer. I know who she is, what she does. I know she’s chill. In-person experience is a lot more valuable than reading typewriter text.”

I gave Toby a pointed look and made sure the next words got across very clearly.

“It’s a shame I can’t remember meeting more candidates.”

“Widdershins!” Toby called out, snapping his fingers and then whistling as if he was calling an animal, “Get over here.”

The slightly over-inflated hazmat dork plodded over to us, his hands clasped together like he was holding a frog, or mouse, or some other small creature that would escape if he loosened his grip even in the slightest.

“Golden Boy. Not. Nice to see you. Normal interaction. Nothing suspicious.” he crackled.

Widdershins looked down at me in the chair, or at least I assume he did through his tinted visor.

“Small talk. Very casual. Good to speak again. How is the weather? What of sports?”

“You’re overdoing it.” Toby grunted, taking a small device, like an oddly-shaped thumb drive, from Widdershins’ gloves.

“Uhmm..” I looked between them, figuring there was some sort of secret plot going on, but unsure of what it entailed, “Last time I saw you, you got doused in eyeball goo. That was crazy.”

“I WAS WHAT?!” Widdershins shrieked, his speaker cutting out as the volume peaked.

“He wiped the memory.” Toby grinned to himself, “Guess he has to do it again.”

Without so much as a further word of explanation, Toby pressed the device to the base of my skull, and for a moment it felt like he had just tased me in the spine. A sudden, electric surge cooked my brain in its own juices, leaving my face feeling numb and I could taste smoke.

I belted out a string of pure gibberish.

“Shh.” Toby regarded the researchers again, “Know anything different?”

It took a few moments to get over the surprise of what seemed, on the surface, to be a third act betrayal. Then, my mind righted itself and I found I had a few new thought-passengers on the memory express.

I could recall going to that prior CRP subsite, over and over again. Not necessarily entire scenarios, but bits and pieces of important interactions. Everything that had been sucked out of my skull was spat back in, and it felt just as gross as that sounds.

One time, on the way there, we stopped for a chalupa.

I remembered meeting Harold, the silent security guy, time and time again. I remembered falling for the “hidden elevator” prank more often than I’d ever want to admit. I remembered the time we went cow-tipping after one trip, but the cows were skeletal and glowed in the dark like white phosphorus. I remembered every awkward introduction and every time I actually managed to hit it off with somebody.

It was all there, again... but it never should have been taken in the first place.

“You back yet?” Toby asked. He could’ve lifted my head off of the table or put my tongue back in my mouth for appearances, but he didn’t.

“I lemeber ebleything.” I responded, now truly knowing what gobsmacked felt like.

“Finally, the CRP’s obsessive-compulsive need to archive every single fucking detail comes in handy.”

Toby passed the device back to Widdershins, who stealthily cupped it in his hands once more and snuck off in a rigid crouch.

I sat up with a renewed sense of purpose and, pressing my tongue back in with my fingers, gestured for Toby to lean in close. I all but whispered a few names and designations as he was all ears.

“Done!” Toby called out, no doubt interrupting countless ego-stroking conversations as the room fell silent, “I want the following research documents in front of us.”

A few of the researchers circled the table while the rest looked on.

“CRP-9889, The Partner.”

A pair of withered, pale poindexter hands dropped a file in front of us.

“CRP-0209, the Fumigator.”

Nerd girl hands with mathematical symbols on each fingernail clapped a folder into Toby's grasp.

"I don't know, Not." Toby turned to me again, "If we give him back his poisons, he's probably just going to poison us."

"So give him everything but the human poison." I shrugged.

Toby snorted and went back to calling out orders.

"CRP-6601, The Old Switcheroo."

A motorized hand prosthetic swept a collection of paperclipped pages across the table's surface toward us.

"So we add Gossamer to this and, obviously, very obviously, Stan Watson and his really, really cool sword." I muttered in Toby's direction.

"It is pretty cool." he muttered back in agreement.

The file for Gossamer dropped on the table, followed by a laminated binder with "CRP-0102, The Excalibrator" emblazoned on the cover. I pushed the binder away a bit, wanting to preserve the mystique on that one.

"Ladies and gentlemen," I stood up from the chair, producing yet another ear-splitting squeak, "Allow us to present... The Redactions!"

"It's just another strike team," Toby put his hand on my shoulder, and pushed me back down onto the chair, "They've put together thousands of these all over the world, Not. Settle down."

With that, plans were put into action. By Toby. Despite the fact I had come up with them. I told myself I wasn't petty enough to want the credit, but in the following hours the thrall found more than a few occasions to laugh at me for being, quote, "an idea cuck".

Stan Watson, wielding the Exalibrator (God it's so awesome) would portal the team into the danger zone, then provide escape once the mission was successful. Hopefully. In between, he was good for slicing and dicing away any problems that might come up.

"Golden Boy" would take the lead, at the forefront of what was very likely going to be an attack on an insane spider-demon from the land of nightmares. With his inability to die, his hair-trigger readiness to shoot monsters in the face, and the ability to puke acid in his back pocket, it was actually pretty likely he wouldn't need any help at all.

Gossamer would be the heart and soul of the group. She was there to see if she could talk to or reason with the Screamcatcher. Maybe even find out what it wanted and why. If it could be taken in peacefully at all, she was the one who would be able to do it. In

addition, the creature created deadly, super-sticky webbing... and the only thing that can easily traverse a spider's web is another spider. Her pets would be invaluable in beating the beast at its own game.

Toby would form a friendly bond with Officer Jackson Lincoln, The Partner. As a trained police professional, he would be ready to follow orders and participate in complex operations. His marksmanship would also help out a lot. Most useful, though, was The Partner's ability to hyper-augment the innate skills of anyone he bonded with. This phenomenon would, unfortunately, only be triggered if The Partner was killed, but luckily he would essentially respawn after 48 hours.

Buzz, the Fumigator, was good at poisoning bugs.

The Old Switcheroo would come in handy if things started going south. The stone monolith with a vaguely humanoid form was shown to take the place of living beings who were in legitimate mortal danger. As long as they had previously touched it, of course, because arbitrary rules are fun. If someone was about to get chomped down on by the Screamcatcher, this slab of rock would suddenly and inexplicably change places with the victim. Hopefully the monster would break a tooth on it.

The six of them stood in a CRP triage center, back at the subsite I had visited so many times. Medics busily took their vitals as the thrall and I sat in a pair of waiting room chairs in a curtained-off area.

"I never did read your name." I said, only to break the silence between us. The thrall had pulled herself up into a ball, nearly disappearing in my hoodie.

"What's it matter?"

"It doesn't I guess. I just wish I had read the name tag before it fell off. It's weird thinking of you as 'the thrall', you know?"

"It was a random tag, anyway. Belonged to some idiot that got sacrificed during the takeover."

"You don't have a name?"

"I don't need a name."

Silence, again.

I held my hands out in front of me, as if pushing away any judgement that might come my way, either then or now.

"I could... theoretically... pitch a few names. See if anything works."

"Oh, like I belong to you? Hard pass."

“Okay.”

I looked down at my shoes, the laces tied much more expertly than I was apparently capable of on my own. I never realized I apparently didn’t know how to tie my own shoes until that day.

“Thanks for re-tying my shoes. Kinda weird, but nice.”

“What-the-Hell-ever. The way you did it was dumb as fuck.”

Unreadable little shit-head.

I jumped with fear as the curtain was suddenly and loudly pulled aside. Toby, now clean shaven and dressed in his usual combat attire, regarded my reaction with fleeting disapproval before ushering us both up from our seats.

“Alright, everything’s ready. Let’s go.”

“Go?” I parroted back, confused for the millionth time, “Go where?”

“You don’t want to watch?” Toby asked, “There’s a base camp in Isla de Lucia, it has security cameras set up around the area of interest. Once we make it there, you stay put and enjoy the show.”

I wanted to watch. I wanted to watch more than anything I had ever wanted up to that point in my life. That’s not saying much, though, because that spot was previously held by a complete collection of vintage “Lords of the Nexus” action figures.

“Big bro, I am not gonna blink.”

Each member of the team - my team - was wearing tactical gear and each had a protective vest with that same strange knot symbol on the chest.

“By the way - what’s up with the icon?” I asked Toby as we approached the others.

“It represents the CRP’s combat branch. It symbolizes strength and resolve - a Gordian Knot. Can’t be cut.”

“That... is actually not what happened in the story.”

As the group walked toward a shimmering hole in the universe, everything else seemed to go still and quiet. It was like every cheesy slow-motion hero walk you’ve ever seen in a major blockbuster.

Stan Watson, sword on his shoulder, necktie flapping in the wind, marching confidently to his destiny, just as the prophecy foretold. Golden Boy, an unlikely member of my own gene pool, marching just behind. Gossamer floating like an

old-timey actress with Buzz skulking right behind and Jackson in tow, fiddling with his badge.

A pair of security guys wheeled the Switcheroo through on a hand cart, dumped it off, then returned.

“You ready?” I asked the thrall, grinning ear to ear.

“I don’t care.”

She took my hand again.

Still goddamn freezing.

The first thing that hit me after walking through the opening was a burst of heat against my skin. The temperature was much warmer than I expected. We had to be somewhere below the Equator.

“A’ight, y’all. Where’s this bug at?” Buzz hollered as he spun in place, aiming the nozzle of his spray gun at the exotic flora around us. It was like a jungle. “Skitter skitter… jump ‘n jitter. Buzzy-Boy wants a BIG ol’ snack!”

Behind his gas mask, I could see all of Buzz’s multiple dragonfly eyes rotating in different directions, searching for any sign of movement. The black, spiked hairs on his arms stood on end. As he turned this way and that, I could hear the chemical concoction slosh around in the tank on his back.

“All I know is, the sooner we get this done, the better.” Jackson wiped the sweat from his bald head with a handkerchief, then stuffed it back into a pouch near his holster. “The wife’s going into labor at any second, and I promised her I’d be there. We’re naming it Jackson Junior if it’s a boy.”

“Oh damn, son. Congratulations, y’all.” The bug-man gave the cop a fist-bump.

“Save the chit-chat. We have a long walk ahead of us.” Toby barked.

He turned to me and gestured to the rest of the group..

“Your team is already getting on my nerves.”

“Don’t forget to bond with Jackson if you want the stat buff.” I figured that was the perfect time to remind him.

“Shit.”

Golden Boy stomped through the brush after Jackson, calling to him.

“Jackson Junior, huh? Little J.J.”

“Yeah. First one in my family that’s going to go to college, mark my words. I got the ultrasound in my wallet if you want to take a look.”

“Yup, let’s see the handsome bastard.”

The two of them went back and forth about life, love, future plans and the like for a solid few minutes before Jackson stopped in his tracks mid-anecdote.

“Something’s out there. Did... did you hear that?” He asked in a hushed tone, his voice full of deep apprehension.

“No, I-” Toby only had a half second to respond as Jackson pulled his service pistol from its holster and spun in place, aiming it at something just beyond the trees.

BANG.

I thought Jackson had fired wildly into the jungle, but that thought quickly disappeared as his grip loosened, the gun fell from his hand, and he suddenly dropped to his knees. Toby crouched next to him in shock as Gossamer swept the thrall and I aside and into some bushes, her spiders already gently webbing us to her hands.

A group of eight to ten mystery men, dressed in identical, sleek, black armor emerged from all around us, rifles drawn. On each man’s chest was yet another symbol - a hand with a pair of eyes at the center.

“The Fucking Faceless Corporation...” Stan Watson growled, hefting his sword into an attack position in spite of all the weapons aimed at him.

Another clandestine organization.

“Golden Boy... I...” Jackson sputtered, now lying on the ground as blood seeped from his mouth.

“Hold on, Jackson.” Toby seemed shaken, but only because this was how The Partner’s whole thing worked, “Don’t you die on me. I don’t lose my men. Ever.”

Shaking, now, Jackson stuffed a paper into Toby’s hand.

“Take this to Rhonda. Tell her I’m sorry. It’s...” He coughed, “It’s the lease to that club we always wanted to open... was gonna... was gonna surprise her...”

Jackson fell limp. Lifeless.

“He was three days away from retirement!!” Toby screamed out, sending flocks of jungle birds fleeing into the air.

“Real sloppy,” one of the Faceless goons snickered, the smugness coming through his featureless faceplate, “Using teleportation in the middle of nowhere? The ripples in space-time had our sensors going off before you even finished opening the path.”

“You’re here for the Screamcatcher.” Stan Watson growled in an even lower growl than before, “Let me guess… your haggard old CEO wants the secret to eternal life?”

“Of course she does,” the goon scoffed, “She’s transitioning into politics.”

As Gossamer shielded me and the thrall from behind cover, my attention shifted from Stan Watson’s entirely unphased performance, to Toby, who was slowly rising to his feet, the rage visible in his heaving shoulders as they rose and fell with each breath. The distraction was giving him time to collect himself and, more importantly, for the Partner’s post-mortem effect to take root.

“Sleep now,” Toby said, staring down at Jackson’s body, “I will avenge you.”

With that, Buzz threw a canister to the ground, where it hopped, spun, and began spraying a cloud of green-tinted gas in every direction.

“Yee-yee!” Buzz cheered.

Toby rushed the Faceless goons as they opened fire, hundreds of bullets bouncing off of his impervious muscles in a starfield of tiny sparks.

The three of us ducked lower as trees exploded from the ricochets, then watched as Toby leapt through the air like a wild animal, grabbing goons left and right, ripping their armor apart at the actual seams. The grim spectacle, censored by thick wisps of mist, brought to mind a circus acrobat who juggled limbs and organs.

As the fog rose, the gleam of Stan Watson’s sword shone through and I saw him not exactly lopping off heads so much as he was cutting through the very fiber of reality around them, their heads vanishing in a prismatic warp of light. As he sank the blade into a goon’s chest, an implosion consumed him from inside out with a viscous splat.

Toby grabbed a goon by the helmet as his rifle fired into the sky, then kicked off of a bullet-riddled tree trunk and spun through the air with enough force to pop the head off like a cork.

Feeling queasy, I averted my eyes, looking instead at the thrall next to me, whose gaze was fixed on Stan Watson, her pupils perfectly following every move he made. Even the hopeless demon-ass-kisser, a parasite on a parasite, seemed impressed by him.

As the smoke cleared, literally and figuratively, the goons were dead, and in many, many pieces. The only one left somewhat intact had the business end of Buzz’s poison sprayer down his throat as the bug-man did a little jig over the bloating cadaver.

“Balloon man! Balloon man!” he called out with glee.

“I think that’s all of them.” Toby said, panting, “Wow... that revenge kick is no joke. I was flying.”

Jackson’s clothes lie empty on the ground. He’d be back at his old precinct in two days, and the CRP would be waiting to pick him up again.

“You may emerge.” Stan Watson called, wiping his bloodied blade with a palm leaf.

I was about to stand as I caught the glint of a gun barrel pressed against Gossamer's head from behind us.

“Hey!” I shouted, every hair on my body rising in an instant of pure shock and horror.

BANG.

The gun recoiled, the casing flew free.

Shards of rock pelted me in the face as the Switcheroo fell forward in Gossamer’s place, a small divot left where the bullet had flattened against its head.

Thank fuck for magical stones that swap places with people who are about to be killed.

The Thrall and I all but fell out of the bush, scrambling toward Toby, Buzz, and Stan Watson as the Switcheroo rolled slightly downhill between us like an oversized bowling pin.

A man dressed in a ghillie suit followed from the brush, gun drawn and pointed directly toward me.

“Everyone chill out.” ghillie guy commanded, “You’re surrounded. I’ve got men in the trees. Don’t make any sudden moves.”

The thrall scuttled to Stan Watson’s side and cleaved to him for protection. I’d be lying if I said that didn’t sting a bit.

“Who is this one, now?’ Toby shouted at me, as if I knew what the fuck.

“My name isn’t important,” ghillie guy sneered through green face paint, “Very sloppy. We picked up a signal from a portal detector and followed the pings. Figured those Faceless Co. shills would be sneaking around... thanks for taking care of them.”

“You with the PGP? QMT? ASG?” Toby asked.

“XYZ.” ghillie guy replied.

“That’s the last group I would’ve guessed.”

“The entity you’re after is ours, soon as we locate it. We have license to eliminate any roadblocks along the way. Right about now, you CRP knot-heads are looking like a bunch of speed bumps.”

With my hands in the air, I backed up to Toby as if I was joining the group of hostages. It’s true that Toby could’ve done all of this alone... especially since he wouldn’t have to worry about anyone else getting shot. Sure, the Switcheroo was our literal life-hack, but if two or more mortals caught a bullet at the same time, there was little it could realistically do to help.

Trying very hard not to move my lips, I mumbled a message to Toby.

“Shoot... Stan Watson.”

“What?” he mumbled back.

I don’t know if he didn’t hear me properly, or if he was in disbelief.

“Shoot... Stan Watson. Now. Swap him out.”

With the grace of a panther... or the agility of a cheetah... with the movement type of some sort of cat, Toby unhitched his holster, raised his pistol to the side, and shot Stan square between the eyes.

The Switcheroo took the shot like a champ, its inscrutable carved face unflinching as Stan’s sword fell to the ground where he had once been standing.

A hail of gunfire from above lit Toby up, never breaking his skin, but driving him down onto a knee from the sheer force of impact. The burst of firepower only stopped when the ghillie guy raised his hand into the air.

Gossamer now lay on her back where the statue had rolled, looking disoriented and ill. Her blonde hair was splayed out in the mud.

“Where am I?” she croaked out, “Oh my goodness, what is happening?”

“Gossamer,” I did my best to sound purely concerned for her well-being, though I had ulterior motives, “There are bad guys in the trees all around us. We can’t see where they are, so there isn’t very much we humans can do.”

Ghillie guy focused his gun on me again and took a few steps forward.

“That’s a really specific way to phrase things, friend.” he squinted at me.

Gossamer cleared her throat, and it was adorable.

“Boys,” she righted herself, then got to her feet, “If you wouldn’t mind, I’d like to ask something.”

Ghillie guy turned the gun on her quickly, and I could hear a low rumble in Toby's chest. He didn't like that one bit.

"Do you know which spider can kill a man the fastest?" Gossamer squeezed a wad of mud out of a handful of her hair.

"I don't." ghillie guy looked Gossamer up and down, no doubt noticing the spiders hurriedly crawling all over her, straightening out her clothes.

Gossamer sighed, as if disappointed by the answer.

"Shall we find out?"

Only one man started screaming at first, then another joined, and soon bodies were dropping from the trees like mindlessly shrieking coconuts. Mindlessly shrieking coconuts covered in countless local spiders.

The screams and profanities reached a fevered pitch as the horde of barely-visible, camouflaged men contorted and thrashed around in the tree line all around us before running, stumbling, crawling off in every direction. Realizing that the tables had turned, their leader slowly raised his hands in the air and turned back to his former captives.

As soon as ghillie guy turned to face us, Toby unleashed an unholy spew of demon blood. It sizzled on contact with the air as his target was doused by the acrid deluge.

Instantly reduced to a pair of ghillie legs, what was left of him toppled over in opposite directions.

"Sorry," Toby wiped his chin, "I was working that up for a bit. Had to come out eventually."

Before we could even begin to collectively decide on how to retrieve Stan and get back on track to addressing the murderous mega-arachnid that was still waiting for us out there, another unexpected turn in the most obnoxious series of events took place.

The thrall, having hefted Stan Watson's heavy-ass sword as best she could, now stood a few yards away, laughing maniacally. I guess anyone could lift it, after all.

She screamed out and lifted the sword, upside-down, about two inches off of the ground.

"TAKE MOMMA TO HELL, BAYBEEEE!"

A fracture opened up in front of her. Not a nice, peaceful, wobbly little portal like I had gotten strangely used to. No. This was a wicked, fractal scar on the face of existence. A jagged and festering wound that bled darkness and spat hatred.

She wasn't trying to get close to Stan Watson. She was trying to get the sword.

That's my parasite.

"Oh, piss off." Toby said as he shot her in the back.

The Switcheroo teetered in her place as the sword dropped and the opening healed itself.

"I-I just saw Hell." I stammered, "I saw Hell... I saw Hell..." I slapped myself, but couldn't bring myself to do it very hard. Still, it helped jostle what I had just seen to the back of my head.

Stan Watson, having been brought back into the fold, recovered his sword and shot Toby a sour look.

"Warn me next time you shoot me." he scolded.

"Now, I've been a patient man," Buzz broke in, "But I swear ta beelzebub hisself if y'all don't make with the crunchy critter real quick-like, I'm bout ta lose my damn mind."

"We all want to get on with the mission," Toby snapped back, "Hold your horses and-"

"Horse flies," I interrupted, "hold your horse flies. It's bug-themed."

Toby sucked in a breath through his nose and let it out his mouth.

"Not... Every word, every sentence, every paragraph that comes out of you doesn't need to be some awful fucking meta-level joke. Time and again, you never fail to make me question why I put up with your shit."

"Probably because you needed me to do your job for you. To build your little super-team."

"I didn't need-"

The argument was cut short as we heard footsteps in the leaves nearby. Lots of footsteps.

"Not again." Gossamer whined, putting her hand to her forehead in frustration.

It was time for everyone, other than the Switcheroo, to duck for cover this time. The whole group peered through greenery as a lock-step formation of white-clad stormtroopers marched through the clearing. When I say that these men were perfectly in sync, I mean I have never before or since seen such a well-oiled machine of forest-flattening death.

Their outfits, otherwise nasty neat, were spattered with copious amounts of blood.

Two men at the center of the crowd held a reinforced metal case between them.

“Aaaand, it’s MOP.” Stan Watson noted.

“We’re done, here.” Toby stated coldly.

“What’s MOP?” I seemed to be the only one out of the loop. Surprising, right?

“The Magnum Opus Project.” the solemnity in Gossamer’s words told me most of what I needed to know, “They’re ruthless. Unstoppable. The best at what they do. Not the type to engage in a conversation while spiders climb up their pant legs.”

“So they’re... what...” I struggled to think of something bigger than a covert government organization or a multinational conglomerate, “Illuminati or something? Wow, are the Illuminati real??”

“Worse,” Toby swallowed hard, “They’re from Dandy.”

That threw a wrench in the gears of my mind.

“Dandy...” I mused, feeling like I was trying to place the name of an estranged friend.

Then, it all came back to me.

“The cartoon studio?!”

“The cartoon studio that owns every important media company in the world. They’ve been trying to bring their beloved founder back from the dead for about sixty years, now.”

“The Lucky Lemming people?”

“Yes. What are you having difficulty with? They’re a cutthroat organization. They can do whatever the fuck they want, to anyone, anywhere, at any time. They don’t break laws, they change them.”

“The people who build silly amusement parks where little babies go to meet Dandy heiresses and funny talking animals.”

“Not, you have a very limited understanding of late-stage capitalism.”

“Shh!” Buzz hissed as the MOP drones suddenly stopped, in unison. Each of them turned their head to the Switcheroo, one after the other, at an even rhythm. They might not have known we were there, but they knew someone was somewhere.

Unimpressed, the Switcheroo seemed to stare them down.

Without a word spoken between them, the drones fanned out, with four remaining to guard the metal case.

“Whatta ya figure’s in the box?” Buzz whispered. He raised his gas mask, exposing the rest of his misshapen, buggy face, and took a few sniffs of the air, “Hooo-wee. Whatever it is, it smells good. Like… ooooh, like spider… ‘n scorpion… ‘n just a dab of tick. Mmm, mmm!”

Toby and Stan Watson looked at each other with dread.

“They already killed the Screamcatcher. That’s its heart, or head, or something equally vital,” Stan Watson whispered through gritted teeth. “They clearly know more than we do. As usual.”

“Son of a bitch.” Toby shouted quietly.

“Just shoot them and take it.” I was beyond done with the situation. I shouldn’t have been there in the first place. At that moment, after everything I had seen and been through, I couldn’t feel any emotion other than regret. “I don’t want to do this, anymore.”

“They’re MOP.” Toby insisted, gesturing at them with an open hand. “What you’ve seen here today is a smooth morning shit to these people. They’ll rain fire on the entire country and build a resort on our bones.”

I wanted to walk away. I wanted to leave everything and everyone behind, and just go home. Hell, I wanted to explain the girl in my bedroom to Mom more than I wanted to be there at that moment.

I just thought, over and over, how I wished I could just put everything that was happening on pause and deal with it later.

I let out a small laugh, just loud enough that everyone checked to see if the drones had heard me.

“Let’s put it on pause and deal with it later.”

“If only we could.” Gossamer agreed.

“We can.” I relaxed, unclenching parts of myself I didn’t even realize could clench, “Stan Watson. Do a portal to the Hallroom right under those MOP guys’ feet. Drop them and the container into the boring liminal box you have going on, and tell the CRP to go get their prize themselves. Actually just deal with it later, man.”

“A buzzer-beater.” Stan Watson smirked.

“When it counts.” Toby gave a single nod back.

A couple hours later, back at the subsite, I was watching CRP security wheel the Switcheroo back to wherever they stored harmless objects. I gave it a salute, but got a blank stare in return.

“Wild y’all ended up in a place like this,” Buzz chatted up Gossamer as they decompressed by a coffee machine, “Pretty girl like y’all should be in magazines. The classy ones, I mean, like waiting rooms got. Not them nudie rags an’ whatnot.”

“Thanks,” she smirked, “Southern charm isn’t dead.”

“Heeey, honey-mead.” Stan Watson spoke into his phone while absently twirling Excalibrate at arms-length, “I’m off work a little early, was thinking maybe we… oh… The Lich King, huh?” he sighed, “Yeah I guess I could take care of that when I get back. Full power, or… yeah, of course he is. Neat.”

Yet another pair of security thugs toted the MOP drones’ silver case into a side room and closed the door behind them.

“Welp… that’s that.” I looked to the thrall, who was brooding nearby, arms folded. “Sorry you didn’t go to Hell, I guess.”

She glided around me in a circle on my old heelys, then off into the hall, never unfolding her arms or even looking in my direction.

“Told you not to fuck that thing,” Toby moved in where she had been standing, “It won’t love you. It can’t even like you. It’s a waste of effort. Thralls are garbage all the way down.”

“For the last time, I’m not going to fuck her. Why is it so hard to believe I would friend-zone a bucket of ooze?!”

“Sure. It’s obviously patterned on you.”

“Like a duck?”

Toby didn’t answer.

“Ducks pattern on people.” I explained.

“Yeah, like a duck then.”

Tired, dirty, and three-fourths-crazy, I wanted nothing more in that moment than to hop through a wormhole and land directly in my bed.

“Well, this has been a hoot. I hope we can do this again sometime. Or, just a thought, maybe we could toss a football back and forth at the park. I know that might be a little too wild for you, but-”

“What, you don’t want to be here when we open it? After all that?” Toby knew how to influence me. He’d had a lot of practice.

“I... do. But I’m also pretty sure there are tropical creatures in every fold of my clothes.”

“Hurry it up,” Toby turned and walked toward the door, “and bring the thrall before it gets into the vents.”

The rooms we walked through were dark, like the entryway to a screening room at a movie theater. Quickly, a charged silence overtook the three of us as Toby guided us into a black door marked “Viewing Cube”.

In a v-formation, Toby led me and the thrall through the strange mirrored room that followed. Not only were three of the walls mirrors, the ceiling and floor were, as well, giving a strange feeling of walking across a very bland and disappointing multiverse.

At the end of the reflective closet was the silver case, sitting on a clear plexiglass stand.

“Ominous.” I remarked, my shrill voice bouncing around claustrophobic space.

“I like it.” the thrall said, still nonetheless frowning while unable to take her eyes off of her own infinite mirror clones.

“Alright, Not.”

Toby had his back to me, and even though he had only said two words, the shift in his tone and demeanor immediately put me on edge so quickly and so thoroughly that it triggered a fight or flight response in my gut.

“It’s time to say goodbye to that thing.”

For a few solid moments, no more was said. Not by Toby, not by the thrall, not by me.

“What do you mean?”

Toby undid the latches on the case, each snap echoing like gunfire.

“The subject needs a host.” Toby wasn’t giving many details, but the ones he decided to hand out were chilling my blood.

I turned my head and locked eyes with the thrall, who immediately turned and broke for the door. Finding it locked, she started clawing at it and biting the handle like a frantic, feral animal.

“This wasn’t the original plan,” Toby turned toward me, his jaw set and his chin high, looking down his nose at me with a steely reserve that was entirely put-on, “Those MOP scumbags hurt the subject real bad, and it needs a new form before it’s too late.”

I looked at the case, its lid now open, as a darkly visible, fetid stench spilled out, accompanied by the sound of mandibles ceaselessly clacking together.

“Thralls are just clay dolls, Not. Playthings for hellspawn. The CRP needs to study the subject. The subject needs a host. You have a thrall right here, right now, ready to go before the thing is beyond saving.”

I watched the thrall helplessly scratching at the metal door. The cell door. The heelys gave out beneath her and she slid down, face-first, with a crack. Still, she dragged herself up by the handle and pulled with every ounce of her strength.

I turned back to Toby.

“Fuck.. that. I saved someone. I did one thing that maybe, somehow, made the world a little less shitty - even if it’s just less shitty for her, alone. I can’t even have that? One damned thing?”

“Oh, for shit’s sake...-” Toby sounded sick to his stomach, “It didn’t pattern on you, you patterned on it.”

“If that’s what you call caring about whether someone else needlessly dies in a soulless institute’s lunatic quest to misuse the power of an evil god.”

“Not, as your brother, I have to-”

“My brother died before I was born.”

Toby’s lantern jaw worked back and forth, but he didn’t say anything.

I turned to the mirrors, to the researchers who were no doubt watching from just behind. A bunch of slobbering ghouls, waiting to see if their shit-head hypotheses were correct. Ready to glad-hand each other, pat a few backs, and plan how and when to start studying their newest pet. However, all I could see in their place was Toby’s reflection.

Lizzie was right.

Lizzie was right about everything.

What’s worse, Toby knew it. He had seen his own file. He had all the information he needed to see past the carrot, past the stick, to the hands that were pulling his strings. Still, he made the choice to continue being their attack dog. For what? Getting to play soldier and eat ice cream before dinner?

“Think about what you’re doing. What you’re saying.” Toby’s voice quivered, I had cut him deep, “Just let her go. She’s not even real.”

“She... or it?” I pushed past him, toward the crate.

“Closing the container won’t stop anything.” Toby called back, I could hear concern in his voice, but I had no place in my heart for it, “They’ll just find another way to do this. I was trying to go the nice route and let you make the right decision. Be smart.”

I had no intention of doing that.

The Screamcatcher thing, it needed a host. Someone empty and meaningless with no intrinsic value to the world. Someone to overwrite, who would never be missed after the fact. Someone who didn’t even get to have his own identity – his own name. A child born to fulfill someone else’s destiny. How can you get less “real” than that?

Fuck Stan Watson and fuck his sexy-ass sword.

This was the real prophecy.

“Her name is Iris!” I yelled out, my voice cracking.

Behind me, at the door, the thrall simply went, “Ew.”

Realizing what was about to occur, Toby broke into a sprint toward me, his heavy footfall closing the distance rapidly.

Gripping the sides of the metal crate, knowing that the unfeeling metal surface would be the last thing I ever touched… at least as myself… I took in a lungful of the sickening odor, held it, and stared directly down into the horrible monstrosity’s twisted, bone-chilling visage.

The thing’s dark eyes were filled with arcane knowledge, lights from sources unknown twinkling in the recesses behind the black lenses. The pallid skin of its face, drawn over tumorous bone growth, gave the impression of jumbled runes wrapped in an ancient scroll. All at once I knew what it was to be afraid to die, and to be at peace with that fear. My heat slowed, as if winding down to draw out what would be its final beat.

“It’s…”

I stammered, staring still deeper into the thing’s very essence.

“It’s terrible…”

I drew in a shallow breath, my chest aching.

”It’s beautiful…”

Toby grabbed me by the shoulders, throwing me to the floor. I laid there on my back, looking up at myself, an out of body experience… but one that was all a trick of the mirrors.

“It’s dead.” I added, bursting out into a demented, sad laugh.

“Are you joking?!” Toby demanded, looking into the crate for himself, then slamming the lid shut so hard that the plexiglass base cracked and the entire thing fell to the floor, “God damn it!”

“How does it feel?” I asked.

“How does WHAT feel, Not?”

“Losing.”

The CRP erased my memory (yet again) after that. Then Widdershins gave it back. I don’t think he was up to speed with what had been going on, and assumed Toby would want him to do it. Hell, maybe Toby would have. Just like with Iris, the more I thought I knew him, the less I knew I knew him.

Or something.

They couldn’t wipe Iris’ brain because she didn’t have one, and though I’m sure the plan was to destroy her as a loose end, I had earned favors from Gossamer, Buzz, and the others, so that wasn’t about to happen. From what I can get out of Iris, they snuck her out in a pile of biohazard bags.

The whole place ran on favors. Really unscientific if you think about it.

In the end, everything just looped back to the beginning again, like a shitty sitcom. The CRP “cleaned” mom’s recollection of events, so I didn’t have to explain the portal or make up a new story about who Iris was and where she came from..

I did anyway, though, and my parents let her live in the cellar. They offered to furnish it and patch the leaks, but she refused. I think she sleeps wedged behind the furnace and I think it reminds her of spooning a demon.

As for me, I’ve solidly fallen into the “people who tell stories” slot, and I’m comfortable there. I’ve started putting out my own graphic novels with a book of short stories now and then. Nothing that’ll win any awards or get perfect reviews, but enough people seem to enjoy it.

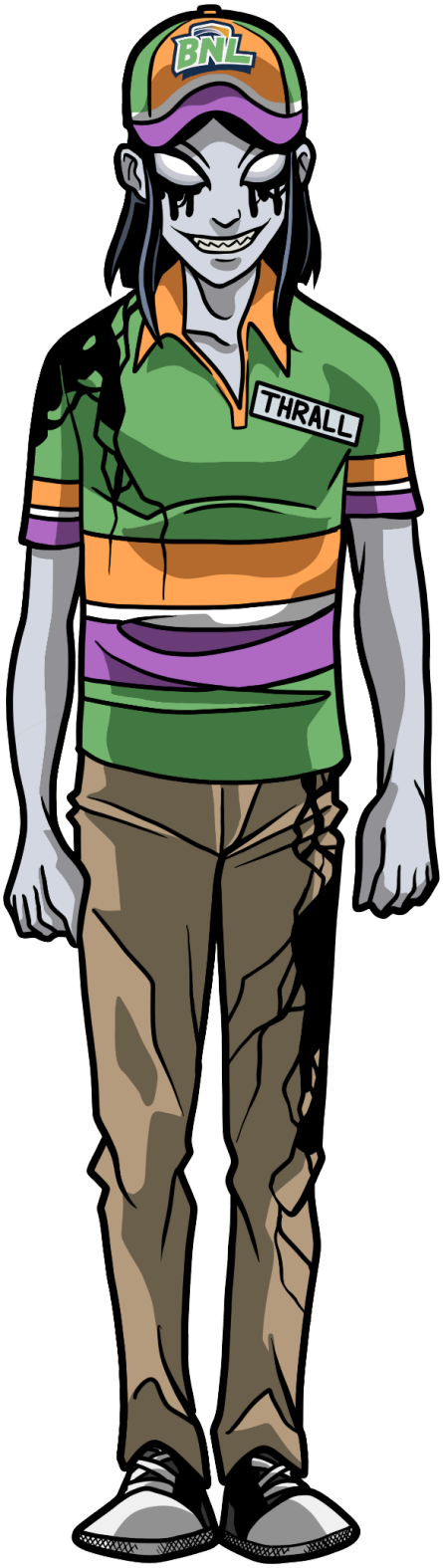
People think I’m a creative genius who invented a complex universe of outlandish creatures and epic warriors with a myriad of astounding supernatural abilities... Really, I’m just stealing from CRP files I’ve read, and people I’ve met, and changing a few key details so they don’t find out.

You’re not going to tell anyone, right?

Hell...

Maybe you already have, and you don’t remember.

My Dumb Dead Brother Is Dead



The surface of the crystal was cold to the touch, which I guess was to be expected.

It stood from floor to ceiling, tremendous and imposing, razor-sharp shards jutting out around its base and crown. Shimmering, electric blue, and filled with glimmering flecks of light, it gave off a faint glow in the otherwise unlit, inky black of the expansive room.

As I wiped the condensation from its surface, probably from my own labored breath, I studied the figure frozen inside.

Stan Watson stared blankly back at me, but as I waved my hand before him, as I leaned left and right, his eyes didn't follow. He stood in a dramatic... actually, a cinematic pose, reaching for the very special sword that now lay in the debris just outside his translucent prison.

"It's kind of pretty, right?"

The voice took me off-guard. I whirled in place, nearly tripping over my own legs, as I searched the room for its source.

By my feet, having escaped my notice until that moment, was Becky's severed head. It had been cut clean from her shoulders, which were nowhere to be seen.

"It's..." I started.

"Oh! No. Wait. Okay, I'm dead." Becky rolled her eyes as if she had forgotten something as simple as picking up an item on her grocery list, "Us normal every-day Earthlings can't talk after we're dead, right? Sorry about that. Pretend I didn't say anything."

"Becky, what the fuck happened?" I all but begged, my mind awash in countless conflicting thoughts and emotions.

She just pressed her lips together, shut her eyes as tight as she could, and didn't answer.

She was simply a normal dead human, after all.

Hang on. I'm getting this out of order.

Alright. Wacky Taxes - no. Still too far ahead.

Hmm.

Okay, the beginning. I definitely know which part that is. My brains have not been scrambled beyond all sense and logic.

The sky turned red one day. It had been a few years since anything abnormal had happened in my life, unless you counted Iris going through handfuls of low-level,

low-requirement jobs only to be fired from each one for doing something highly unprofessional to a person or object.

No Toby, no CRP, no anomalous this or supernatural that. Just a pleasantly mundane life of low risk and even lower expectations.

The crimson clouds overhead would've been a welcomed sight, had they rolled in at sunset. In the mid-afternoon, though, they were just ominous and spooky.

"Any idea what's up with that?" I asked, leaning against a dumpster behind Buy-N-Leave.

Iris, reposed atop said dumpster like a renaissance painting of urban squalor, squinted upward and shrugged.

"Looks fine. Better, actually," her eyes widened as joy overtook her expression, "Oh shit, is God dead?"

It was the happiest I'd ever seen her.

"Probably not," I remarked offhandedly as she collapsed back into a minimum-wage-induced stupor, "But maybe?"

Yes, there has been a time skip. No, we had not become a couple.

An improbably bright crescent moon cut through the clouds, rays of scarlet-tinged light trailing down like the cosmic searchlights.

"Leeet's... get back inside." I half-whispered, still staring upward.

"I'm still on break," Iris pulled her Buy-N-Leave hat down over her eyes.

"You can be on break indoors."

"Oh wow, is it too red out for you? Okay, pussy."

She pulled open the large, steel back door of the convenience store, letting it clang against the wall as it swung free. I didn't work there - or anywhere - but the place was loose with its standards, so I followed her in.

"What's going on out there?" Manager Todd asked as Iris and I passed by his office. Manager Todd gestured to his sad little office window with a single sharpie.

"No idea." I replied as Iris kept walking, completely ignoring him.

Manager Todd was a prematurely exhausted 30-something who had transferred to our area to take over the position. He had seen it all at his spot in the city, so neither my

presence in the back room, nor Iris' entire state of being, ever seemed to raise any red flags for him.

"Might be a wildfire... check the news. If it's bad, tell Alice she can go home."

Iris, but whatever.

"Manager Todd says you can leave if there's a fire," I noted as I joined her at the front counter, staying on my side. The customer side. "But don't start one."

Iris switched the small television set from CCTV footage of the store, over to one of the local stations.

"The letter 'C' has super spelling power," exclaimed the fuzzy, cyan hand-puppet on the glitchy, rolling screen, "It's the most important letter! Let's sing the alphabet one more time, okay?"

"Perhaps obviously, I did not mean the educational channel," I chided, "Try channel seven."

Click.

The channel changed to an equally glitched-out picture of the red sky for a moment.

Crash.

The sound of shattering glass made me jump. Iris just narrowed her eyes at the TV screen and repeatedly changed the channel, looking for another available station.

"Hey Manager Todd, you alright?" I called out, walking back to the office again.

I froze at the threshold to Manager Todd's depressing workspace.

The window behind him was broken, as I had all but expected due to the sound of a window breaking.

What I didn't expect, though, was what that had come through - the humanoid that had skewered Manager Todd's head from behind with a single, long, twisted finger.

The digit pressed through his skull like an industrial screw through a marshmallow.

Lanky, disheveled, entirely too long in general, a man-whatsit was crawling through the small opening in the wall. It wore a grimace fraught with guilt. Its eyes darted back and forth as if in angst, though they simply kept shifting and never settled on anything.

"I didn't do it." the whatsit explained.

I didn't believe that.

The long fellow drew his finger back out of Manager Todd's head like a retreating corkscrew. Manager Todd slumped forward, onto his open copy of Muscle Mommies Monthly.

The eyes finally stopped sweeping back and forth as its almost comically nervous face angled toward mine. The excessive amount of wrinkles around its features reminded me of a terribly-drawn internet meme.

"I'm just going to... back away..." I said meekly, one foot gradually finding its way behind the other as I watched its every twitch.

"I'm not gonna do anything," it replied in a quick, almost frantic way.

In an instant, it had finished folding itself through the window and leapt a short distance toward me, its wide wingspan gripping shelves that were barely fixed to the office wall. There, it hung like a Halloween decoration playing "the floor is lava".

I... ran... like... fuck.

"Iris!" I screamed, "Mary Kate and Ashley! Mary Kate and Ashley!"

"I'm not gonna kill you!" the whatsit elaborated as I bolted down the short hallway, toward the front of the store. All the while, I heard its footsteps just behind, on every surface but the one you'd expect.

I dove onto the convenience store floor and slid wildly into the base of a magazine rack. The tile was sticky, dusty, and yet somehow still reeking of floor cleaner.

Looking back, I watched in horror as the twisted man crept out of the hallway, its hands gripping the top of the door frame, its head upside-down and once again sweeping the area with its eyes.

"We reserve the right to refuse service." Iris called out calmly, leveling Mary Kate and Ashley, the store's ridiculously large double-barrel shotgun, at the whatsit's face.

The eyes stopped again, giving the very small woman with the very large gun a sideways glance.

"I haven't done anything."

BOOM.

Blood and brain matter spattered-

BOOM.

Blood and brain matter spattered my face and clothes as I laid directly at the bottom of the blast radius. All I could do was gasp and sputter as I spat out creature blood and swatted chunks of ruptured gristle from my chest.

The whatsit's corpse fell in a motionless heap with a grotesque thud that reminded me of the time I dropped an entire thanksgiving turkey on the kitchen linoleum. The major difference being that instead of having to hear about it once every year, I was going to have nightmares for the rest of my life.

"Oh my God." I screamed in disgust and shock, "Oh my God... Oh my God!"

Iris gave an exasperated sigh, grabbed a container of no-brand car wipes, and knelt down to clean me off.

"I-I think something really bad is happening." I stammered.

"Okay."

"The sky, that monster... Manager Todd is dead, by the way."

"Uh-huh."

"Do you think it's connected? Like a zombie apocalypse scenario? Because I've been preparing for one for years, now. Mentally, at least. Like, in my imagination."

"Sure."

"You're tuning me out again, aren't you?"

"Mm-hmm."

Sparkling fresh and oozing new car smell, I led the way as Iris and I climbed the groaning, rusted-out metal staircase beside the convenience store. At the top, I pulled open the door to our apartment.

"Check the real news. The national news." I pointed to the refurbished flatscreen against one wall of the closet-sized living room and grabbed my phone from the springless couch.

Iris similarly grabbed the remote and began channel surfing.

Click.

"The letter 'C' has super spelling power," the puppet once again exclaimed, felt arms flailing, "It's the most important letter! Let's sing the alphabet one more time, okay?"

"Again, not that." I was getting frustrated, but that happened often.

Click.

“The letter ‘C’ has-”

Click.

“-One more time, okay?”

“It’s on every channel.” Iris droned, clicking through a loop of the puppet’s vacant face.

“Seriously?” I whispered, staring at the flashing screen and holding the phone to my ear. Three rings, eight rings, eleven rings, my parents didn’t answer the home phone.

Iris put down the remote and sat staring at the TV.

“I wanna eat that thing’s face.”

“It’s a puppet, Iris.”

She sighed, exasperated.

“Fine - I wanna eat the PUPPET’S face. Are you happy?”

“You really don’t. It’d taste like cloth and plastic.”

“You say that about so many things.”

“That says more about you than it does about me.”

A scream rang out, and for a moment, the two of us were completely silent. Motionless. Motioning for Iris to stay quiet, I inched toward a window and peered out of the curtain. On the street below, a woman was running to her car from the front door of the shop.

“Oh, the body,” I relaxed, “We should’ve locked up the store.”

Just as I was getting used to the idea of a blood-red sky, an infinite puppet marathon, and an elongated, headless corpse right below our feet, something strange happened.

I watched the woman, the would-be customer, speed off into the distance only to notice the sprawling, squid-like ball of pure shadow that was quickly tuck-and-rolling down the side of the street, straight toward us. On the opposite sidewalk, a phalanx of hollow suits of armor marched ever closer, as well.

“We might need to get going.” I swallowed hard.

The old, used station wagon I had bought off of a classified listing may not have been much to look at, and it may not have handled well at all.

There's nothing positive to follow that up with.

Iris didn't have a license, so naturally she drove.

I studied my own phone, staring at the screen from my position as passenger princess, scrolling through the very limited number of contacts over and over again. Mom had a new cell and I hadn't gotten the number, yet. An oversight, I'm sure. I had long ago listed Dad under the name "DO NOT CALL" so I wouldn't select it by accident.

"Just call." Iris grumbled.

"Not enough of an emergency."

"You're larger, now. You could easily defeat him."

"Not that simple."

"Uh - Pretty sure it is." she shook her head incredulously.

We came to a sharp stop at the entrance to my old neighborhood. They say you can't go home again, and by "they" I mean sour old baby boomers who want to ruin your day. However, in this case, the old adage proved true.

Every house was razed to the ground.

I called "DO NOT CALL".

The phone rang for an uncomfortably long time as Iris sped down the twisting, formerly pastoral little streets.

I jumped out of the car before it stopped rolling. Knees wobbling beneath me, I pumped my feet mindlessly, bolting across the front lawn and losing a shoe in the process. I briefly eyed a scattered, shredded, and muddy pile of comics books among the fallout and kept moving.

There was a note on the front door, and the front door was almost the only thing left standing.

"Toby - We left."

Yeah, that made sense.

"Who is this?"

The voice surprised me. I had entirely forgotten my phone was clasped to my ear.

"Dad!"

“Oh.”

“Dad, what’s going on? Where are you?”

“We’re fine. There was a bus to the shelter.”

“Good. What happened to the house?”

“What’s wrong with it?”

I looked up to where the second floor had been, my eyes trailing down the broken wood and exposed pipes. The house I grew up in looked like a sand castle some tremendous bully had simply knocked over with one good kick. House furniture and lawn furniture were meeting for the first time.

“... Nothing.”

“Well, I’m fine. Mom’s fine.”

Silence.

“I’m fine.” I offered.

“Alright. Talk to you soon.”

Click.

I was purely aghast. Taking in the sight of the house, turning in place and surveying the similar damage to every other home around me, I felt more confused, hopeless, and alone than I had at any time before that point.

Iris laid on the car horn a few times, shaking me out of my stupor.

“My ass,” she shouted through the open driver-side window.

I couldn’t have heard that right. I turned and gave her a quizzical look.

“Mud hands,” she repeated.

Ah. That made more sense... except it didn’t.

A wet, slopping sound drew my attention downward, where a horde of between ten and twenty hands were protruding from the lawn around me. The mud-sculpted hands moved toward me, ever closer, as slow as a cluster of snails.

Fingers outstretched, grasping and feeling along the yard’s surface, the hands drew closer as I looked on in mild concern. One of them gripped a cheery, smiling lawn

gnome and dragged it beneath the soil, the tip of its pointed hat disappearing as the earth closed around it.

“Did you see the mud hands?” Iris called out again.

“Yeah,” I called back, gingerly stepping over them as I walked back to the car, “They’re strange, I guess.”

I sat back in the passenger’s seat and held my phone out in front of me.

“Cortexa, gimme directions to the closest Wacky Taxes location. Please.”

The following ride to the covert CRP subsite was a lot more enjoyable when I could hear myself think. Not having a truck engine and AC/DC rupturing my ear drums was a plus, and despite the mysterious stains, the seat was a lot easier to relax in.

The conversation was still lackluster, though, as Iris very openly brooded about going back to the place that had tried to kill her, overwrite her, and then kill her again when the first two didn’t work out.

The radio did little to lift the silence, every channel playing the same exuberant nattering of that fucking puppet that wouldn’t shut up about spelling.

About fifteen minutes into the drive, I finally spoke up again.

“It’s just that if anyone has information...” I trailed off.

Iris was quiet for a moment, then clucked her tongue.

“Didn’t ask.”

I expected the tax office, Hell, the whole strip mall, to be obliterated like the house. It would just be on-par for the day. I expected it to be exploded, for the debris to be on fire, and for a sea of skeletons in lab coats to be strewn around the parking lot.

Instead, it was just empty. Dark. The only sign of any chaos was the glass-and-metal front door. It was pulled off its hinges and smashed outward, like something - or multiple somethings - had pushed through in a rush.

“Stay here. Keep the car running. Leave the shotgun on your lap,” I instructed Iris, doing my best to keep my voice from shaking, and failing, I’m sure, “If anything shows up, circle the block. I won’t be able to hear the horn down there.”

Not seeing Harold at his desk was disquieting.

Pushing past fallen chairs and climbing over a sideways desk, I made my way to the back of the building, hoping the elevator was even still there, much less in service.

“Evacuation protocol is in effect,” a pre-recorded message led me through the darkness.

I should’ve brought a flashlight.

In the dim emergency lighting of the elevator, I found the elevator pad and tried to remember what Toby had pressed during our many visits to the facility. I didn’t know what was on every other possible floor, and I didn’t have either the time or courage to find out.

“Evacuation protocol is in effect,” the message repeated from a tinny speaker in the ceiling.

“I’m guessing that means... don’t go down.” I muttered to myself, pressing a button I was pretty sure was correct.

The doors slid closed, but only half-way, before the elevator suddenly dropped.

I let out a death scream as I plummeted from darkness, into even darker darkness. That was it - the unceremonious and brainless death of some random loser who really didn’t deserve much spectacle or fanfare in the first place.

Floor after floor whizzed by, and with them, face after face. Some barely visible, others unpleasantly clear. Leering through open doors and watching as I fell past.

The elevator stopped with a jerk and a bounce, as if it had caught on something that barely held in place. All at once I was face-down on the floor with no memory of getting into the position. The carpet tasted exactly how I would’ve expected, if I had ever stopped to wonder how elevator carpet would taste.

The door, still half-open, now overlooked a pitch black hole in the stone floor. A massive dirt tunnel, dug by something incredibly large, loomed below and waited patiently to swallow me whole. The emergency lights were blinking rapidly, now. Sparking. In the shadowy drop of the pit I could see nothing but more pit.

What’s worse, the elevator was now leaning forward precariously, offering me up to the hole as if I were a pat of butter sliding off of a hot spatula.

Maybe I had looked death in the face, literally, one too many times. All I could muster was a sense of bitterness about the method of my demise.

“Welp. This is not what I expected.”

As gravity brought me to the threshold, I caught the slick, cold doors with my hands - but there was nothing of note to actually hold onto. Just smooth metal surfaces.

My other shoe dropped off into the void.

As I silently hoped the pit ended in a subterranean pool of pure spring water, maybe surrounded by CRP entities at least vaguely resembling mermaids, the emergency panel atop the elevator shook free and clattered to the floor. Then it slid out past me and fell into the hole.

A pair of hands reached down from the roof and, positioning myself very precariously with one foot at the base of each door, I accepted the help - regardless of who was making the offer.

The hands were cold. Rigid. Almost as slick and hard to hold onto as the elevator door had been. As quick as I took hold of them, two more hands gripped onto mine and I realized two people were hauling me upward from either side of the open panel.

On top of the elevator, in the shaft, I used my cell phone as a light.

Two completely unrelated living mannequins.

“I guess you guys have to stick together, huh?” I asked, panting and sprawled out on the elevator roof.

The blonde struck a pose and the brunette showed off her cargo shorts.

“Thank you. I can’t stay for the show right now, but thank you.” I scrambled to my feet and felt along the wall until I found another jagged hole in the wall that was guaranteed to be there, somewhere.

Everyone I came across was dead.

Researchers, security personnel, random staffers... a janitor. Massacred in ways I can’t even begin to list here, not due to the grotesqueness but because it would take too long. Granted, it seemed like most of the people there had made it out, but those left behind were both numerous and gratuitously dismembered.

I stopped near a security thug who had been bitten roughly in half, at a diagonal angle, and scooped up the black duffle bag that no longer had an arm to carry it. Expecting to find all sorts of firearms inside, I instead saw a variety of random objects within.

CRPs?

Maybe they’d be more useful than guns.

Wishful thinking.

Moving through halls and walls like I was just another sneaking, slithering abomination, I proceeded onward. I was no longer sure what I was even looking for, but a single person with a single line of lore-building dialogue would be enough to convince me the trip had been worth it. At least I’d have a better understanding of what was happening and how long it was going to be happening.

As I entered a huge, demolished section of the facility, an area that had probably been multiple smaller rooms before the walls came down, I stopped to take in the sight of a towering crystal that pressed upward against the ceiling, almost as if it was the only thing preventing a collapse.

The surface of the crystal was cold to the touch, which I guess was to be expected.

It stood from floor to ceiling, tremendous and imposing, razor-sharp shards jutting out around its base and crown. Shimmering, electric blue, and filled with glimmering flecks of light, it gave off a faint glow in the otherwise unlit, inky black of the expansive room.

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"It's kind of pretty, right?"

The voice took me off-guard. I whirled in place, nearly tripping over my own legs, as I searched the room for its source.

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"It's..." I started.

"Oh! No. Wait. Okay, I'm dead." Becky rolled her eyes as if she had forgotten something as simple as picking up an item on her grocery list, "Us normal every-day Earthlings can't talk after we're dead, right? Sorry about that. Pretend I didn't say anything."

"Becky, what the fuck happened?" I all but begged, my mind awash in countless conflicting thoughts and emotions.

She just pressed her lips together, shut her eyes as tight as she could, and didn't answer.

She was simply a normal, dead human being, after all.

I knelt by the sword and, giving one last reverent glance up at Stan Watson, I jammed it into the duffle bag as best it would fit.

The pat-pat of sensible shoes echoed behind me, and I whirled around, standing with my phone out as if I were aiming one of the awesome guns I didn't have.

“Stealing? Not me!” I spouted without thinking.

The researcher that had unwittingly walked up behind me had a pen light tucked over her ear, nearly blinding me with its very small and weak beam of light. She was as surprised as I was... I think. Her eyes were wide behind her thick glasses... I think. Realizing she had been spotted, she made herself as small as she could... I think.

It was really dark.

I looked to the stack of papers in her hands, then to the numerical symbols painted on her fingernails.

“RESEARCH!” she shouted, throwing the papers in my face and sprinting off into the dark.

Afraid of countless papercuts, I dodged the flurry of notes, memos, and file folders, then began running after her for some reason, duffle bag weighing heavy on my shoulder and throwing off my balance.

“Stop!” I yelled into the darkness, only catching the flicker of the pen light every so often, “I’m not a dangerous CRP! I’m a normal human guy!”

Which is what a dangerous CRP would 100% say.

“I’m looking for Golden Boy!” I called out, finally losing the researcher in the blackness. I spun around in place a few times, the light of my phone only finding featureless walls and hunks of rubble.

“I’m his brother!” I finally hollered.

Silence, other than the sound of dripping water someplace far away.

“That makes more sense.”

I screamed again as she emerged from the dark, right in front of my face.

I grasped for my own heart and nearly doubled over as the researcher placed a second pen light over my ear. Her hands made quick, bird-like movements as she fussed with the light until it sat in a very specific way.

“An advisor? At your age? In retrospect, that was blatant deception.” she added.

I followed along as the researcher flitted down the hall, to this door and that, poking her head in and presumably looking for more papers to collect.

“Dr. Mooney. Eileen Mooney, but don’t refer to me as Eileen or any variation of Eileen. ‘Dr. Mooney’ is acceptable.”

“Uh, nice to meet you.”

“Your name is Not. Unless that was another deception.”

“Kinda yes, kinda no.”

She stopped, turned to me, and closed the distance, her rounded glasses steaming up beneath my nostrils.

“I don’t prefer those sorts of answers,” she said flatly.

“What are you still doing here? How are you still alive?” I asked as we continued to parts unknown.

“Someone has to preserve data. We have our back-ups, our mainframes, the cloud - but what good is that going to do when the power is gone and the generators run out of fuel?”

“Quite the optimist.”

“Eugh. I hate that word.” She audibly gagged.

We stopped at a bashed-in door and Dr. Mooney set about picking up and arranging papers again.

“So what’s going on out there?” I asked, leaning in what was left of the door frame.

“Classified,” she answered before I had finished speaking.

“I think it’s pretty public, actually,” I chuckled bitterly, then patted my duffle bag, “You can tell me or you can be a dick about it. I’ve got some probably powerful items at my disposal, and I can figure it out on my own. It’ll just take longer if I have to go find the clues.”

Dr. Mooney stalked over warily, tilted her head, peered down her nose at the bag, and God damn this woman had to have been a bird in a human suit or something.

“Don’t combine CRPs,” she scolded, “The results are rarely positive.”

Feeling less badass and more sheepish, now, I rubbed the sweat from the back of my neck and averted my pen light.

“Well, I mean, I didn’t put most of it in there.”

“Every newbie wants to combine them. This and that. That and this.” Dr. Mooney shook her head, flat, drab hair barely moving, and went back about her demented business, “What happens if we give the thermos full of dark matter to the man who can drink anything? Let’s find out... Well, about 24 hours later, what happens is a free-floating

singularity in the sewage system. Then you have everyone using portable toilets for six months."

"Well, I mean I'll probably only need the sword."

"Excalibrator, I saw that. You shouldn't have it, but of course you shouldn't have any of it. Additionally, you shouldn't even be here. However, I don't exactly possess the upper body strength to stop you."

Content with her new stack of papers, Dr. Mooney moved past me, out of the room.

"Just tell me what's going on." I called after her as her light gradually disappeared once more.

"Don't combine CRPs," she called back, "Every newbie wants to do it."

She told me nothing, but she told me a lot.

Iris was waiting, engine idling, shotgun at the ready, when I stepped out of the portal and approached the passenger door. I twirled the sword a few times, then sheathed it back in the duffle bag.

Sitting in the car, I let the moment hang in the air for a bit.

Then I geeked out, hard.

"Did you see me?"

"Unfortunately, yes."

"With the sword?" I all but jumped up and down in my seat.

"Yes."

"Did I look cool? Holding the sword, I mean. Like it was meant to be in my hands? Like a new chapter was being written - a new prophecy for the ages?"

"I wouldn't go that far."

"But it was cool."

"It was very cool, yes." Iris begrudgingly admitted.

We drove off, though neither of us knew where to. Hanging around the epicenter of a massive anomaly breach just didn't sound like a good use of our time, however much we had left.

“Someone combined CRPs.” I explained to Iris as we headed down a highway flecked with the flattened bodies of millions of crabs, “Someone new to the institute. Apparently, that’s a bad thing. I guess whatever happened as a result caused... this.”

I gestured to the red sky, the gore-speckled road, a mountain in the mid-distance that was slowly being overtaken by what looked like a giant, self-knitting, ugly Christmas sweater.

I don’t know what I expected Iris to say to that, but I know I didn’t expect what she did say to that.

“So we un-combine them.”

Was that her own idea, or was she just moving things along, knowing that was where I’d eventually head with the conversation? Iris was chaos incarnate. A profane, vulgar, and largely amoral steamroller of bad-dog behavior. If one thing had remained constant, however, it was the overwhelming apathy.

I chose to let myself believe I was finally seeing some character development out of this bitch.

“Uh, yeah. We un-combine them. However that works.”

She let out a high-pitched, primal scream of sorts and threw her Buy-N-Leave hat out the window, followed by her nametag. It said “Alice”, anyway.

My phone rang.

Unknown caller.

I put it on speaker.

“Hey, Toby.” I answered.

There was no reply for a moment. Just a pregnant pause that could’ve been carrying an unspoken respect or seething discontent.

“How’d you know?” Toby’s booming voice rattled the speaker.

“Who else?” I smirked.

“I can hear that,” Toby remarked, “I can hear the smile. You’re not that clever.”

He hoarsely cleared his throat and continued.

“Listen, I don’t have a lot of time and I’m not supposed to be contacting anyone. Everything you’ve been seeing today, it’s because of us.”

“Someone combined CRPs.” I half-interrupted.

Silence again.

“Yes, how did you-”

“I’m that clever.” I fully interrupted.

“Okay. I don’t care. If you want to know what’s going on, come to the OSS. If you don’t, keep driving to wherever you’re going, and good luck to you.”

“The OSS? Another organization?”

“No, the Off-Site Site. An emergency location. We’re set up in the old Casting Couch VHS rental place in Dove Hills.”

“Yikes. That... is quite a name, looking back at it.”

“It was the 90s, Not. Different times. Gross times.”

With that, he hung up.

I let Iris mash the gas pedal for another mile or so before reminding her that we were going nowhere near Dove Hills. She popped a u-turn - on the highway - and we headed back. Luckily, the few cars still out on the road were no issue, since they had already been smashed and burnt-out.

Lucky for us, I mean.

“Your brother sucks.” Iris didn’t take her eyes off the road, which was good since she was speeding like a motherfucker.

“Yeah, well... I suck, too. So whatever.”

“Everybody sucks.”

“Yeah.”

“Everything sucks.”

“Yeah.”

The would-be saviors of Earth, unlikely heroes, throwing themselves into an unwinnable battle with a simple yet effective war cry - “Everything sucks.”

The Casting Couch motion picture & video game rental super-store was a shadow of its former self. Not that it was ever anything more than a sketchy rectangle of cinderblocks to begin with. I had been there once before, right before it closed, when

mom and dad wanted to pick up a heavily discounted VHS-to-DVD converter that changed all of our outdated videos to soon-to-be-outdated videos. Back then I was content to just stand at the already dusty and flickering Skull & Crossbow arcade cabinet in the entryway, so I actually hadn't seen the full interior before.

When we arrived, the parking lot was surrounded by chain link fencing topped with hastily unspooled rolls of razor wire. Instead of a minimum wage schmuck dressed as the company's mascot (a large old-school television with legs), the entrance was guarded by actual guards. Like six of them. With full-body armor, reinforced faceplates, and heavy weapons.

"Halt!" they all shouted in unison as Iris skidded up to the gates. All six shot each other a few glances. They clearly hadn't decided who was going to be the "halt" guy.

I slowly rolled my window down as they patiently trained their guns on my face.

"I'm here to talk to Toby." I explained.

They didn't say anything. One of them adjusted his aim.

"Golden Boy." I added.

A couple of the guards looked back and forth between themselves. They must've been transplants from another location. Given how many dead security thugs I had seen in the ruins below Wacky Taxes, it should've occured to me sooner that they had been shipped in.

"American Shwarzenegger."

"Just a moment." one guard grumbled, stepping away while speaking into a walkie-talkie.

In the following tense silence, I focused on a small radio in the newly assembled guard booth. The volume was low, and it was mostly static, but I could barely make out the words being sung.

"Let's sing the alphabet-"

Lousy, obnoxious puppet.

"Get a move on," the walkie-talkie guard shouted gruffly, as if we had been wasting his time. He waved the car through the checkpoint as Iris immediately floored it again, causing the other guards to scatter like geese.

"Throw MK&A in the back," I instructed her, "If they see anything we're carrying, they'll just confiscate it all. One red flag and we're out of there."

Iris threw the shotgun over her shoulder with a clatter. I gently placed the duffle bag on the rear floor and mentally promised the sword I would be back for its gorgeous self soon.

We had parked between some sort of mobile assault vehicle and a Pull-It moving truck that probably had some real creepy shit inside.

“Not and the bile woman,” the voice was familiar, if not comforting in any way.

It was Widdershins, wearing an industrial-grade exoskeleton of weapons and tanks that I can only describe as “unnecessary”. He strode across the parking lot with wide, hydraulic-assisted steps, leaving potholes with each step.

“Alive. Good to know. Here to apologize?”

I wanted to tell him to fuck off, but I was pretty sure the large pipes resting on each of his metal-clad shoulders were twin flame throwers.

“Not exactly. Just wondering what’s going on, and if we can help stop it.”

“Very bad. Worst case scenario. Unexpected but not surprising. Prepared for. Yet out of control. Very interesting.” Widdershins didn’t seem to be particularly put off by the situation, and just sounded happy to be part of things.

“I talked to Dr. Mooney,” I gave the name-drop hoping it would help get me to more information, “Apparently someone combined some CRPs together? Is that right?”

“Mooney. Alive? Also good to know. Always working. Busy bee.”

“Yeah, I guess that’s right. She was running around in the dark, preserving files.”

“Wait.” Widdershins waved an over-sized robot hand in my face, inadvertently spraying me with hot steam in the process.

He looked over Iris and me, as in, literally looked over our heads from his new position several feet taller than us. As I turned to see what he was watching, I heard unsettling, distant laughter. It wasn’t evil laughter, or even necessarily insane laughter. It was the goofy, guttural laugh of a cartoonish dimwit.

Just outside the fence, a round, bulky man made of multicolored socks ran at the enclosure near the front gate, quickly climbing to the top, where its fabric started to catch in the razor wire.

Widdershins was already thumping over to the scene as the guards at the gate riddled the gibbering sock knot with a hail of automatic gunfire. The sockstrocity screamed in that same cartoony tone as pieces of it were blown off. Within moments, Widdershins was lighting it up with what did indeed turn out to be twin flamethrowers.

I couldn't shake the feeling that it had been following us for a while.

The inside of the Casting Couch store was just as out-of-control as the exterior. Groups of researchers moving this way and that, pushing past each other and getting into dorky little shouting matches. Workers moving crates, barrels, and boxes on pallets, yelling for everyone to disperse and get out of the way. Speakers blaring information not a single person was listening to.

The only quiet thing was the unplugged arcade cabinet at the front, which I was definitely going to take if I could fit it on the station wagon... and if I lived through the day.

"Toby!" I called out, spotting the top of his head over an empty, cobwebbed movie shelf. Any semblance of apprehension about making contact again would have to be pushed aside. There was too much going on to mess around.

Iris was already overwhelmed by the sheer amount of bustling sociopaths who no doubt regarded her as a wad of phlegm. She clung to my back, pointy chin buried between my shoulder blades and arms around my chest. I was a human shield.

"Not?" Toby called back, having no idea where I was in the crowd.

More gunfire erupted outside, followed by an explosion, but I assumed that had been happening on and off for a long while by that point.

With my living backpack I made no bones about shoving my way through nerd after nerd. I had one shot at wrapping my head around almost dying, losing the home I grew up in, and potentially watching the world end. No time for etiquette.

The only lead I had now was the emotionally-stunted attention whore that took every previous opportunity to leak information to me in the hope I would see him as the super-hero he knew he wasn't.

"Not. You're... standing up straight." Toby observed.

"Gave up video games," I nodded, "Been less hunched over, in general."

"Good. I see you've managed to keep track of that thing."

Toby gestured to Iris as she stayed glued to my back.

"Iris." I did my best to lower my voice and sound stern.

"If you say so."

"I do." I lowered my voice even more.

"Save that line for the wedding." Toby quipped, unphased.

I looked to Toby's wrist, where he wore what looked like a chunky monitoring bracelet - similar to one you'd see on the ankle of someone under house arrest.

"I see you're wearing jewelry, now."

"Still can't let anyone else get the last word in, huh?"

"... Nope."

He said nothing as he turned and marched off through the crowd, not so much pushing researchers aside as he was letting them bounce off of him as he walked. A couple of them lost their balance, papers spilling everywhere, while Toby moved on like a disaffected high school bully. I followed along as Iris gave up any semblance of dignity and engaged full piggy-back mode.

We stopped at a private viewing booth which was definitely used for oddly specific adult videos back in the day. Toby held back the beads and the three of us went inside.

"Iris stays," I noted as Toby let the beads fall behind us, "Anything I can hear, she can hear."

I shook her off onto the red pleather chair to one side of the room.

"Sure," Toby peered between the beads like a misbehaving child making sure his parents weren't watching, "If it's stuck around this long, it's just an extension of you, now. Congratulations, you gave a thrall Stockholm Syndrome."

"So a newly hired researcher combined CRPs." I tried to get the conversation back on track. The less I had to look at, listen to, and think about my brother, the better.

"Not just a new hire. A mole, we think. Probably from Faceless Co."

"That makes more sense. In retrospect, that was blatant deception." I tried to act as if I knew what the fuck.

Toby turned to a television opposite the chair and grabbed a remote control.

"Are we gonna watch the puppet?" I asked, knowing that every channel, audio or video, was currently being hijacked by that alphabet-loving shitboy.

Toby paused, back turned to us.

"Damn," I thought I heard a hint of actual respect in his voice, "You actually do know your shit."

With that, he played pre-recorded footage of what I assumed to be a testing room at one of many CRP locations. Just a white table, white floors, white walls, and what was surely a two-way mirror to the back.

To my surprise, that same exact puppet was lying on the table like it was about to undergo a child-friendly autopsy. We were indeed going to “watch the puppet”.

Even though I was wrong, I was right.

“Wozzle T. Wizzle, to be exact, from the TV series Jaunty Junction.” Toby anxiously tossed the remote back and forth between his hands, “CRP-6294, the Know-It-All. Anomalous properties include, but are not limited to, speech capabilities and low-level mental telepathy. You shove your hand up its backside, it talks to you, teaches you about any subject on an expert level.”

Toby was starting to sound a lot like the scientists he despised.

“Any subject?”

“Yup. Brain surgery, nuclear physics, home brewing, anything.”

Suddenly, a researcher walked into the room onscreen. A balding, otherwise nondescript man in yet another standard lab coat.

“That’s Dr. Carlysle.” Toby snorted.

The man on screen, Dr. Carlysle, moved quickly. He seized the puppet, then looked back over his shoulder once, twice, three times. Toby paused the recording and pointed at one of Dr. Carlysle’s hands.

I squinted at the less-than crisp picture.

He was wearing a single tan glove.

“That’s CRP-9904, the Master’s Touch.” Toby pressed play again, “Anyone wearing that glove can simply touch any media in any format and instantaneously learn its contents. Touch a book, and it’s like you’ve already read it cover to cover.”

Dr. Carlysle placed his gloved hand inside the puppet, who in turn seemed to raise up on his own like a reanimated corpse from a zombie movie.

“See...” Dr. Carlysle mumbled, his voice echoing in the small room, “See... See! SEE! SEE!”

Toby paused the video again.

“We think he wanted information about the CRP, and knew the puppet could teach it all to him... but he needed to be quick and go unnoticed, so he used the glove in the hopes it would make the learning process instantaneous. Faceless has been trying to buy us out, if they had all of our information... identities, passcodes, locations... it would’ve given them massive leverage.”

Toby unpaused the video.

Dr. Carlysle instantly exploded in a cloud of giblets, after which a security team rushed into the room. All the while, Wozzle T. Wizzle floated in mid-air, unaffected by the blast and still wearing what remained of Dr. Carlysle's arm - like a morbid butt plug.

"What do you think he saw?" I asked as the footage ended.

"What do you mean?" Toby sounded completely lost.

"Well, he was saying 'See... See.. See...', so what could he have seen?"

Toby chuckled to himself.

"No, Not. See, it's not 'See', it's 'C'."

"I think one of us is having a stroke right now."

Toby took a marker out of one of his many pockets, uncapped it with his teeth, and started writing on the wall.

He wrote one large "C".

"The letter. 'C'," he tapped the wall with the marker.

"I see," I said, seeing the 'C' and slowly recalling the scene I had seen.

"It's..." Toby paced a bit in the small room, as if he was trying to decide how far to go in leaking highly dangerous information, "It's an extra-dimensional being."

"Wozzle?"

"Not the puppet."

"The glove?"

"No."

"Dr. Carsysle?"

"The letter 'C'."

"I... okay... I'm still going with the 'stroke' idea."

"The letter 'C' isn't actually a part of our language. It's an entity our minds can't clearly comprehend - a living thing beyond human understanding. It wormed its way into our collective consciousness, and it's been slowly growing, replacing other letters, making us think it had always been there. It's a metaphysical mimic."

It was absurd, but it made a creeping, horrible sort of sense that only took root more as I thought about it. What did a C do that other letters couldn't? Why DID it exist?

Toby started writing on the wall again, which made him look like a raving lunatic.

"Let's say you want to write out something like... 'catch a cat by the face'. This is how it's supposed to be written."

Toby wrote out "KATSH A KAT BY THE FASE."

"You been out catching cats by the face, bro?"

"It's just an example."

"So... what? There's literally nothing anyone can do about a fucking concept." I rubbed my temples and tried to get my thoughts back in order, "Unless we all agree to clap our hands and not believe in it anymore or some shit."

"We don't have to fight the letter," Toby explained, crossing out his own writing for some reason, "This is one time where it's acceptable to just kill the messenger. The only problem is - we can't triangulate where the broadcast is coming from."

Toby pressed a button on the television and brought up a live channel. Wozzle T. Wizzle popped up on the screen, spewing his usual bullshit about the power of the letter "C". With a more clear picture, I could spot the glow of arcane wisdom behind its plastic eyes. I could perceive the waves of dark energy rippling from the puppet, distorting the background.

"Combining the glove and the puppet allowed Wozzle to see the C and fully understand something so outside the scope of all mental awareness that it became the thing's harbinger. Its prophet."

Gunfire sounded outside, again. This time, it was more drawn out and frenetic.

"Crimson clouds. Crowds of crawling crabs. It's all connected." Toby ranted, writing "KONNEKTED" on the wall, "It's influencing CRPs, pushing the low-minded ones over the edge, the damned letter was hiding right there in our name and designations the whole time."

A bell, a light, and a whistle all went off in my head at the same time, and I snapped my fingers in what was probably my own very first authentic "Eureka" moment.

"It's sending CRPs to hunt you down. That's why they were after me. We have the same name. The same DNA."

Toby was taken aback a bit, but collected his wits quickly.

“They-” He stammered, “I didn’t realize they were tracking you down, too. Yeah, I... uh, I was the one who brought Wozzle into the Institute in the first place. It has a specially sewn-on hate boner for me.”

“Iris saved my life.” I directed my thumb at the mouse-quiet girl now balled up on the chair behind me, knees pulled up to chest, “Blew a monster’s head off and got me outta there.”

I left out the part where she had to wash me down like a messy toddler.

Toby openly grimaced at Iris, then looked at me with a slight sneer that gradually faded. He was scarily quiet for a moment, before returning to a somewhat casual stance.

“Good on her.” he mumbled.

“Wait,” I stepped back from Toby a bit, but there wasn’t much room to do so, “You’re a CRP. Why isn’t the puppet controlling you? Can’t it just make you jump in front of a truck or something?”

Toby raised his wrist cuff and absently fiddled with it for a moment. It looked like it was on tight enough to slow circulation.

“Too high-minded... but if I do start acting out of pocket, a random guard I don’t know presses a button and I get knocked out with a shit-ton of mega-tranquilizers. I can’t die, but I can be put down in other ways.”

“You’re bullet-proof. How would that even work?”

“Absorption. Like a fast-acting nicotine patch.”

“Oh. That’s actually a pretty logical weakness.”

Toby stood more rigidly again.

“Thanks, I’m real proud of it.” he nodded sarcastically.

Toby stared hard at the cuff.

“They’re... right to not trust me,” he obviously wasn’t trying to convince me, but himself, “Everything I’ve done to build my reputation... it doesn’t matter if my brain can be tampered with. Cold hard fact is, I’m really just another anomalous being.”

I took a break for a moment and searched the store for something Iris could do to take her mind off of being the sole survivor of a bloodbath perpetrated by the man I was talking to and the organization we were surrounded by. I found a box of unsold action figures from various film franchises in the back room, so she spent the rest of the

meeting sitting criss-cross on the floor, opening each figure and popping their heads and limbs off with her teeth.

For the next half-hour or so, Toby and I discussed the puppet from Hell and its growing grip on more and more of the country. It was clear this wouldn't stop until the entire planet was drowning in c-related atrocities.

The CRP was in shambles. The local branch was decimated in ranks (hey, the correct use of decimated) and reeling to such a degree that the plans for how to decide on a method by which to determine what to do were still in the brainstorming phases. The CRP as a whole, beyond our surrounding area, was focused on moving and locking down what Toby described as "a thousand equally dangerous world-enders" in their custody. Toby couldn't set foot off the OSS grounds without being mobbed by escaped CRPs and possibly 'going rogue' himself... and neither could any other trusted CRPs from their fun little strike teams - for the same reason.

All because a dude shoved a leather glove up a puppet's ass.

Gunfire yet again. Another pair of explosions.

"It's getting worse," Toby parted the beads and looked out at the chaos again, "More frequent."

He turned to me, and for the first time I saw the slightest tinge of fear on his face.

"How long until it gets tired of sending others to do the job?"

Quickly, I realized it wasn't a fear of dying, or even of losing, that was plaguing him. It was the gnawing realization that everything he had become accustomed to, his carrots and sticks and crutches and diversions, were about to be taken away from him.

No one over him. No one under him. No one to impress or disappoint. Just a man who might live an eternity alone with his thoughts.

When night fell soon after, it was almost a comical affair.

I watched scientists, men and women of logic and reason, bed down like a group of scared children having the world's worst sleepover. I half expected the patrolling guards to tuck them in.

As I lay on a cot, phone in my hands, I surveyed the place where I would probably die.

Iris was on the next cot over, face-down, raucously snoring into a pillow made out of my rolled-up jacket. A group of researchers, burning the midnight oil, ranted and raved to one lit side of the building - though to their credit they at least tried to keep their voices down. My attention ended on yet another small radio nearby, playing the millionth encore of an incredibly annoying puppet's alphabet song.

Why were they so adamant about leaving it on?

I checked my phone again, “DO NOT CALL” on the screen.

I didn’t call.

“The letter ‘C’ has super spelling power,” the repetition was driving me crazy at that point, all I wanted was for it to stop, “It’s the most important letter!”

The puppet’s voice broke from its routine...

“You know what? We should SHOW them how important the letter ‘C’ is!”

Like 50 people sat bolt upright on their cots.

That was why they left it on all over the site, so they’d know when Wozzle was done fucking around.

“Yeah!” the voice chirped in the silence of our communal dread, “Let’s take a field trip, boys and girls! Won’t that be fun? Hoooraaay!”

If the Casting Couch video rental shop had been like a bustling ant colony before, then I can only describe what followed as the agitated buzzing of a kicked hornet’s nest. Apparently, the security force I had grown used to seeing so far was actually a small selection of rotating personnel. Seeing all the security thugs together, I wondered where the rest had been hiding... probably on the roof, keeping watch.

Troops in heavy armor, blacked out and motionless, lined the fencing in all directions. As I watched from between the boards affixed to the front windows, I tried to count the ones I could see, and lost track multiple times.

The moon was gone. The sky was a starless, empty expanse.

Most of the researchers piled into an underground shelter that must’ve been constructed by the CRP in the years since the store closed. Toby offered to help me and Iris get “a good spot near the supply crates”, but not one of the three of us believed it would actually make a difference.

“Come with me.” I told Toby, leaving him behind and not looking back.

It was finally my turn to lead.

Outside, the station wagon was a little burned... and had a few extra bullet holes... but it was holding together pretty well, all things considered. I unlocked the back door and moved aside as Iris grabbed Mary Kate and Ashley with a satisfied growl.

Flood lights illuminated the parking lot as Toby stood just behind us, watching the wall of guards for any sign of danger.

“You’re going to shit yourself,” I said, excited to make the big reveal, “Assuming you can shit, that is.”

I pulled out the duffle bag and let it drop to the pavement with a thud. Proudly, smugly, I drew Excalibrator from inside.

“Son of a bitch.” Toby said, eyes wide.

“Yup.” I grinned.

“Stan Watson died?” He continued.

I slumped a bit. Not the response I was expecting, and honestly it made me feel like I might be a bit of a sociopath.

“Oh. Yeah, I think so. He was in a crystal, not moving or breathing or blinking. Yeah, he’s, uh... he’s really, really dead, man.”

“We can’t use it,” Toby stated, deflating my ego even further, “Combining CRPs lead to this shit. The higher-ups forbid using any anomalous objects until further notice... which they probably won’t be alive to give.”

I smirked.

“Well, you can listen to the CRP, the people who made a shit ton of rules that, in the end, didn’t stop a God-damned thing...” I kicked the duffle bag to Toby’s feet, “Or you can break those rules with us as we get horribly mangled on our own terms.”

Toby wasn’t convinced. He’d heard this sort of rhetoric before, from Little Lizzie, who he apparently hated with a passion that... now that I think of it... probably had some really sick lore behind it.

“Just take a look in the bag.”

With a heavy sigh, Toby knelt down at the duffle bag and pulled it open.

“Jesus Christ!” he shouted, causing a couple guards to turn their heads slightly.

“Hii-ee!” Becky’s head sang out from inside the bag, “Even though I’m just a completely normal, dead human head, it’s still great to see you!”

Toby lifted what was left of Becky out of the bag by a handful of her hair.

“Not, that really wasn’t funny,” he quietly grumbled.

“I very much disagree.” I noted - yeah that’s what a sociopath would do. Huh.

Setting Becky's pleasantly smiling head aside for a moment, Toby began to rummage around in the bag, pulling out items and setting them carefully next to Becky.

"I knew a random jumble of CRPs would come in handy," I explained, "Looted them from a guard's corpse."

"Stapler.. Lamp..." Toby listed the items as he studied each one, "Laptop... Picture frame... potted plant... telephone..."

Toby placed his head in his hands.

"Not, this man was just cleaning out his desk."

"Ah," the sword drooped a bit in my loosening grip, "Okay. Didn't think of that."

Thoom...

The first echoing thrum sounded in the distance, shaking the ground and setting off a few car alarms.

"Shit." I turned and locked eyes with Iris.

Thoom...

"Looks like it's lesson time." Toby stood, dusted himself off, and squinted, steely-eyed, into the pitch black night surrounding the fences.

Iris loaded the shotgun with a toothy grin.

Thoom...

"Use the sword to get out of here." Toby pointed at me authoritatively, "Hawaii, Latvia, Dubai, go anywhere and stay there."

He raised another hand and pointed at Iris. "Take Alice with you."

"Iris. It's part of an eye, it's a flower, it's a legitimate name." I reminded him.

"Look, I'm trying, alright?"

I hefted the sword on my shoulder.

Thoom...

"Let's save the sword escape for our last resort." I put my hand on Toby's shoulder and narrowed my eyes at him, nailing the exact pose from the opening splash page of Foreverman #42.

“Incoming!” a voice shouted.

A burning car rocketed out of the night, the glow of its flames lighting up countless shadowy figures standing just beyond the chain link fence. Figures that had been quiet, unseen, until that very moment.

The car exploded on impact with the building, its chassis tumbling end over end before slamming on the concrete below.

“A horde! Waiting?” Widdershins’ squelchy voice shouted above the ensuing fray, “For what? Bad sign.”

Thoom...

Widdershins stormed to the front lines like a tremendous, steel-cocooned linebacker as hundreds of security thugs massed in formation and opened fire on the darkness. Joining the guards, Widdershins released belches of what must’ve been napalm into the shadowy crowd beyond.

Through the sound of weaponry and the inhuman shrieks, I swear I heard Widdershins laughing like a bitcrushed maniac.

Just as suddenly as it had started, the gunplay ended. Everyone, including Widdershins, looked upward into the night sky.

“C is for Colossal,” an ear-splitting, bassy, distorted, yet horribly familiar voice called out above us all.

“Unexpected and surprising,” Widdershins remarked as a tremendous cyan foot dropped from above, crushing him in an explosion of metal and flame.

THOOM...

A few of the guards were instantly immolated by the blast, while others dove away in all directions.

The flaming foot, about the size of a city bus but clearly made of countless yards of felt, raised back up into the air slowly, kicking away the fire that clung to its surface.

“Oopsie!” the deep, warped thunder-roll of a voice said, “C is for careful... Wozzle should have been more careful, boys and girls.”

Power lines snapped and sparked as the thing, the puppet, lowered its massive head into view, glassy, cold eyes now as tall as buildings, flapping puppet-mouth a tremendous chasm set with a tongue that looked like a red carpet to death itself.

The guards regrouped quickly, firing thousands of bullets into the titanic face. Bullets that crackled and ricocheted off its eyes and got lost in its fur.

“Alright.” Toby stepped away from me before I could even take my gaze off of the stupefying monstrosity that hung above us, “This ends now.”

“No!” I called out as Toby confidently marched across the blacktop.

“Here I am.” Toby yelled, drawing a pistol with one hand and a combat dagger with the other, “Right here, kid’s stuff. How about you try teaching ME a thing or two, huh?”

The bastard was going full martyr.

“C is for consciousness,” the kid’s channel kaiju boomed, head tilting, mouth clacking, “It’s time to lose consciousness!”

The hand swept down again, this time plucking a very specific guard out of the group as the rest took cover. The guard screamed in unrestrained terror as the puppet lifted him off into obscurity.

Toby looked down suddenly as the cuff on his wrist started beeping rapidly.

That guard had the button. Wozzle really was a know-it-all.

“Not, go inside-” Toby turned back to me quickly, but as he did, his whole body simply twisted at the waist as his knees went out from under him. In an instant, he had flopped to the ground, motionless.

The hand snatched Toby up with alarming speed as I broke into a sprint, taking a swing with the sword only a few seconds too late.

“C is for copy...” The voice echoed again. Now, Wozzle was nowhere to be seen, like an angry deity that was all around us, “Time to erase the copy.”

“Bring him back!” I screamed, turning in place and staring upward as the remaining guards watched from safety, “You third-rate, bootleg, knockoff, public access motherfucker! Bring him back, now!”

The puppet’s laughter, usually high-pitched and annoying, was now low and jarring. The definition of “all kinds of wrong”.

“Little boy, did you know that Wozzle knows allll of your funny stories?”

The toy was toying with me? Ironic, I guess.

“Okay, well..” I wiped the sweat from my face and the hot tears from my eyes, “What did you think?”

Silence. Other than the car alarms.

The face emerged from the dark again, staring directly down at me like a whale shark about to suck up a very under-developed krill.

“Wozzle thiiinks... that you write like Joss Whedon and Diablo Cody had a brain damaged baby.”

I swallowed hard.

“Holy shit... That’s the meanest thing I’ve heard in my life...”

One giant hand rocketed forth and, with a single fuzzy finger, flicked me through the air like a paper football with thoughts and emotions.

If I had shoes, I would've been knocked clear out of them.

As I sailed away, through the ringing in my ears, I heard Iris dumping shotgun shells into it, and all I could picture in my mind was the thing casually squashing her into an oil stain.

With most of the CRP staff hiding underground, my trip through the glass and boards of Casting Couch video rental was mostly unimpeded - except for the glass and boards.

“Not?”

The room was spinning while the ceiling moved in rippling waves. I tried to focus my eyes, but couldn’t remember how they worked.

“Not. Are you dead, too?”

I didn’t feel dead, which in that moment seemed worse than being dead. I eventually realized I was lying on top of a toppled display rack - a peg board that left a few metal pegs in my back and shoulder.

“Not, I have to tell you something kinda embarrassing.” Becky’s head stood over me, on tentacles that had unfurled from the stump of her neck.

“You’re not human?” I asked weakly, squeezing and releasing Excalibrate’s handle as I tried to get feeling back in my hand.

“It’s something I’ve never told anyone, Not, but, like... you seem like a pretty good guy, so maybe I should just come clean.”

“You’re not human,” I coughed blood.

“Gosh, this is all so sudden,” she tittered, “I never thought I’d ever, in a trillion eons, ever-ever-ever say this to a mortal... here I go...”

“Becky, nobody believes you’re human,” I could barely gather the breath to croak out the words, “No one has ever believed you’re human.”

“Not… Until now, you’ve been under the impression that I’m an average human girl from planet Earth. The truth is I’m an eldritch space horror from beyond the known cosmos.”

I didn’t respond, instead choosing to waver in and out of a light coma.

“Well, aren’t you gonna say anything?” Becky prodded my cheek with a tentacle as I simply gave an empty groan. I think my eyes were looking in different directions.

“Okay, whatever,” Becky smirked, “Don’t tell anyone I did this.”

“Wha-?” I watched, mostly paralyzed, as Becky’s severed head octopus-crawled up my chest, to my face. She pursed her lips as they drew closer and closer to my own.

My final thought before dying just might have been how disappointed I would be to get brought back to life by a clichéd fairy tale kiss.

The shadows creeping in at the corners of my vision cleared in an instant as Becky’s own eyes lit up like high-beam headlights. Her lips parted, her jaw unhinged, and she let out a universe-rending banshee scream that shook the walls. All the while, unceasing waves of cosmic jelly pulsed from her mouth and into mine like a mother bird feeding her baby pure terror.

I felt like I was drowning, floating, freezing, burning, and celebrating every birthday past and future.

I was the birthday clown, the cake, the pony, and all the guests.

I was the bounce house and the bounce house rental fee.

It’s difficult to explain.

I felt the slither of movement under my skin, separating muscle and bone, shifting everything inside of me ever-so-slightly.

Becky was gone.

Standing up, I looked myself over. Not a scratch, other than the pegs jabbing into muscle. I reached back as best I could and pulled them out without even flinching.

“Thank you.” I whispered, finding an odd reverence in my own tone of voice.

My senses sharpened. The war outside came flooding back to me like someone spun the volume knob up as hard and as fast as they could. I could hear the fibers of space

and time stretching around me like tightening guitar strings. I could taste the grit of atoms in the air.

It was fucked up.

I listened to the sound of Wozzle happily splashing his hands in the gory slop of countless flattened men, and felt every cell of my body tense.

“Oooh,” Wozzle cheered over the sound of a rocket launcher firing, followed by a blast, “Pretty!”

The last thing Toby had said echoed around me.

“Go inside.”

Knowing what I had to do, how to do it, and what the outcome would be, I drew Excalibrate upward, creating a wobbly wormhole through which I took a leap not of faith but of inevitability.

Iris reacted with the reflexes of a cheetah, dropping the spent shotgun without even questioning why I had emerged from a portal and swept her up into my arms. She looped around my torso, and I swear in my heightened state of perception I could see her bending and stretching like a liquid.

She went into piggy-back mode in one smooth motion as I cut another hole in everything and dove us both through.

The inside of Wozzle was like a fuzzy cyan cave. Dark, muffled, warm, but not at all welcoming.

The portal closed behind me as I dropped the sword, watching it spiral downward and fall to the ground at the massive puppet’s feet. I had to let it go as my hands found the equally oversized leather glove that was lodged in him.

“Grab on!” I shouted to Iris as I gripped handfuls of leather. She obeyed, gripping onto it alongside me.

“We un-combine them!” Iris cheered.

“Uh oohhh...” Wozzle said, his voice even louder inside of him, “Someone’s doing something very naughty!”

Placing my feet against the walls of Wozzle’s fist hole, I began pulling, pushing, kicking, and twisting, trying to rip the glove free. Iris followed suit like my vaguely goth shadow.

“Wozzle feels very silly, reaching into his own bottom.”

The puppet's hands entered the hole below and began moving upward toward us, feeling along his own walls with searching fingers, each one four times our size.

"Don't try this at home, boys and girls. Wozzle is experiencing very special circumstances."

Finally, the glove pulled free, acting less like a parachute and more as a choking mass of weighted cloth that wrapped us up and dragged us downward at a terminal velocity.

"Iris!" I screamed out in panic, shrouded in glove and falling fast.

"Everything suuucks!" she called back as we fell, nothing but pride in her voice.

I don't know if morning broke or if Wozzle had been keeping it dark, but either way, the sun was up in a very not-red sky. I was on my back again, Iris draped onto me crossways. Neither of us was feeling good.

I think we were in an overgrown lot near the video store, bordering on a forest, but I didn't have a strong grip on reality at that time.

Realizing I was holding a very normal-sized glove in my hand, I held it up to the sunlight and laughed. The rise and fall of my chest was enough to jostle Iris awake as she rolled over and elbowed me in the guts along the way.

"This... is going to be hard for them to cover up." I sat up and turned, getting on all fours.

I didn't feel as cool or as powerful as I had just moments earlier. This feeling was punctuated by a dry heave, after which an olive green chrysalis dropped out of my throat and burrowed into the ground.

"Uh..." I watched the hole collapse in on itself, "Good luck, Becky Junior... I think?"

"Hey!" Iris was crouched nearby like a gargoyle, Wozzle T. Wizzle now small and unmoving between her feet, "I got a C-word for ya, but it's not family-friendly."

With that, she tore the puppet's face off with her teeth and choked it down. White cotton stuffing flew everywhere.

"So..." Toby leaned on the trunk of a tree a few feet away, looking woozy, "I don't know how you managed... but... well... Good work, Toby. Hell, after all this, I think I'm 'Not', now."

I sat back down in the weeds as Iris skulked over with the rest of the puppet's remains in her jaws. She settled next to me, leaning her back against me like I was furniture. Once she was comfortable, she tore Wozzle's limbs off, sucking them up like pasta.

After a moment, she turned her head and looked me up and down with a wide grin that was starting to look kind of sharp, again.

“Hey.” Toby pointed and glared at Iris, “Don’t fuck him.”

Welp. A lot of people died. Background characters and fan favorites alike.

All because of a bunch of magical fabric and a letter that isn’t really a letter.

Still, in spite of the tragedy of it all, if you refuse to look at the big picture and hyper-fixate on the small details in order to keep yourself from getting insanely depressed... at least some good came out of it?

For example, it could’ve been much worse. The whole world could be a perpetual nightmare of monsters and murder.

Another example. Uhm...

Well, everyone presumed Toby had been one of the casualties. I guess if anyone had a chance to theoretically “kill” him, it would be something that could manipulate reality on a whim. He got marked off the CRP’s active subjects list, and his files were super-double-mega classified with a side order of erasing him from memories.

He got to disappear into the world, no longer the abused shelter dog that was too afraid to step out of his own cage. More of a wild stray... who probably took jobs killing bad people in return for table scraps.

Even I don’t know where he went. All I know is that, once in a while, I get a call from a private number that hangs up immediately, and that’s his way of saying he hasn’t forgotten any of us.

The CRP was left in such shambles that its assets were eventually sold off to the Faceless Corporation... so, fuck, I guess their whole plan worked after all.

I don’t know if that’s better or worse, but we’ll count it as a positive because the employees who lived get to keep their jobs.

This is the last I’m going to write about everything that happened, I promise. No epilogues, no sequels, no reboots. Not because I don’t want to, but because my brain is so cooked that I don’t think I’ll be able to form a truly cohesive narrative again.

I want to end this on a happy note for you, with some sort of big reward for me, or Iris for that matter, in return for all our trouble - but unless you count my parents getting a fat insurance pay-out, there’s not much there.

Oh!

A production company called a few months after everything went to shit. They had read the original “Dumb Dead Brother” post and they wanted to option it for a feature film. That’s the reward you might be looking for.

Only problem is that they think two characters with the same name will confuse the audience.

I’m probably gonna be written out.